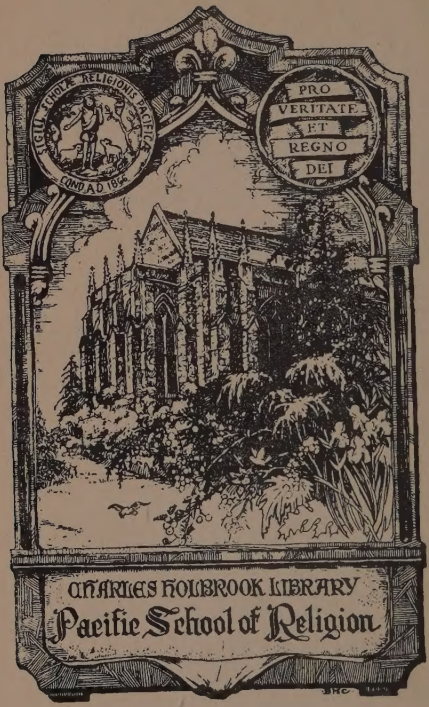
REPRESENTATIVE WOMEN

ANNIE BESANT

by

Geoffrey West

GENERAL EDITOR • FRANCIS BIRRELL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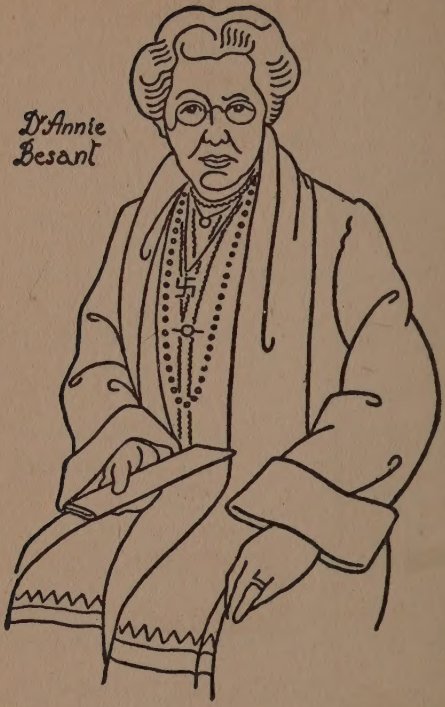
Dr Annie
Besant

ANNIE BESANT

by

GEOFFREY WEST

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Preface

THE present essay is, as far as I know, the only attempt yet published to deal with the life and personality of Mrs. Besant in anything like an impartial spirit. I am neither a Theosophist nor an anti-Theosophist, nor—it is sufficiently relevant to add—attached even remotely to any religious or political organization. The life of Mrs. Besant has interested me primarily as a spectacle, a dramatic progress against a changing background of eighty years. If I have added interpretation or estimate, that has been purely in an effort to aid understanding and restore proportion.

I have to thank Mrs. Besant for her very kind permission to quote as I wished from her various writings, also Mr. Basil P. Howell, of the Theosophical Society in England, for considerable assistance in the way of special facili-

ties for consulting numerous books and pamphlets. I must add that in both cases I made it clear beforehand that I could be responsible only to myself for my final conclusions and opinions.

GEOFFREY WEST

ANNIE BESANT

I

In 1891 W. T. Stead declared Mrs. Annie Besant to be one of the three most remarkable women of his time. The other two were Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Butler, both, like Mrs. Besant, of the "apostolic type," "propagandists militant." They, to a very great extent, belong to a now faded past, and their prominence has dwindled in memory; Mrs. Besant, however, is with us still, and if her star has in some degree sunk lower in the West, that has been by her own choice and that it might rise the more splendidly shining in the East. All that she was then seems to-day but the preface to what she was to become, and to agree that she was remarkable then is necessarily to agree that she is to-day doubly remarkable.

She is, though, far more than a mere phenomenon. Her work, even her work of forty and

fifty years ago, is significant for us to-day where that of Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Butler is forgotten. Her sufferings, her labours, and her victories were the birth-pangs wherein an attitude essentially familiar was shaped and produced, an attitude at least more tolerant and understanding, expressed in a wider sympathy and a concern with the spirit rather than the letter of belief, more human if sometimes less humane, taking a broader and possibly profounder if more bewildered view. It is no longer the fashion to denigrate things Victorian, but to study the life of Mrs. Besant is to realize how many of the swaddling cruelties which public opinion in the sixties and seventies lent all its weight to enforce, would be possible no longer—or only under the most unusual circumstances. In the change thus marked she has played her part, and a great part, and whatever our final attitude to her, this debt must be acknowledged. She battled for free thought in days when hell was an ever-threatening real-

ity, and even intelligent clergymen—leaders of religious thought—declared it the Church's duty, not hers, to ascertain the truth; she strove against the subjection of women, for their education and equality, in a period when the general attitude was that summed up in two sentences from a contemporary article: "No woman ought to be encouraged in the belief that she has separate interests or separate duties. God and Nature have merged her existence in that of her husband." She gave in the seventies the first popular impulse to the modern birth-control movement by her public defence of its principles in the face of every insult and ascription of obscene motive; she upheld upon platform and in print the rights of smaller nationalities at a time when the intoxication of empire still rose unrestrained. She was a socialist before Socialism became respectable, an advocate and organizer of Trade Unions when even the workers accepted them unwillingly, a propagandist against roy-

alty, capital punishment, the existing land system, and for woman suffrage and equal justice. Upon all these issues she was, if never alone, a pioneer, and time has justified her; there is not one which is not to-day either so fully accepted that it is taken for granted or would not be discussed with a vastly wider tolerance than even she, probably, dreamed of. She fought, it is clear to us to-day, on the side of the angels, and it might seem ironic—were it not that we instinctively take it for granted—that like all agents of heaven she was attacked most bitterly by the godly.

There was indeed, it appears, scarcely a public controversy from the seventies to the nineties, touching intellectual, social, or political freedoms, with which she did not identify herself upon the unpopular side; typify her era she certainly does not, but she may be said to have summed it up in very large degree simply by the extent to which she ran counter to its most cherished beliefs and prejudices, fought against

the storm of its reactionary forces. By a study of her might be discerned, as through a glass, distorted sometimes in detail no doubt but on the whole true enough, a picture of the period. Told in full, her life-story would be unfolded against, as its necessary background, a panorama of the last eighty years.

But her significance is more than this, and it is rather in this additional respect that her later progress into Theosophy becomes relevant. For though throughout her life she has been deeply involved in politics, the essential fact concerning her is that she has been from first to last a religious adventurer, a spiritual pilgrim. Herein she has a special importance which can be indicated only as her progress is outlined and studied.

It may be asserted then without further ado that she is a woman well worthy of attention. But even were this not granted for the reasons stated, still it would be true. Her very career, regarded simply as spectacle without thought

for its consequences or implications, would provide an abundance of interest. In the very scope and number of her activities, in the causes to which she has been attached, in the great men who have been her friends or her opponents, there is matter for more than an essay. To relate the story of her life is to tell of ever-widening horizons, of heights scaled with difficulty and distress—yet seldom with despair—to reveal ever-increasing vistas, until at last the following eyes turn beyond sea and land, beyond all material boundaries to the breadth and depth of unmeasured space, to insoluble problems of the infinite and eternal. At one end of the story is encountered the country clergyman's wife, an attractive, handsome, unhappy girl struggling fearfully and alone against her first timid doubts—at the other a leader of Indian national politics, president and autocratic director of the world-wide activities of a new and prosperous religion, a white-haired upright figure of striking dignity, eighty years of

age yet still apparently in the full vigour of life, proclaiming to all men with the perfect serenity of an assured knowledge the near coming, promised to her by Himself in person, of the World-Teacher, the Christ—and being followed in her faith by thousands! Few novelists would venture to attempt to bridge the gap between, and fewer still could achieve the actual variety of circumstance and, moreover, its inherent plausibility. The life of Mrs. Besant has been, in fact, an adventure too strange not to be true.

It is, then, as a pioneer, as a spiritual pilgrim, and as a unique personality that the subject of this brief study may be regarded. In the following pages it will be necessary to give due attention to each of these aspects in turn. Only by doing so does a just estimate become possible.

2

THREE-QUARTERS of her blood and all her heart, Mrs. Besant has said, are Irish; but she was born in London, at twenty-one minutes to six precisely, in the early evening of October first, 1847. Upon the stage which is this world fate lends to our entries as to our exits an equal lack of congruity. We are thrust into existence no less inappropriately, if less noticeably, than we stumble out. Birth to an even greater degree than death refuses to recognize the decencies and formal dues of life. No strange events foretold the coming of little Annie Wood, and if stars danced or shone above her that October evening they did so unseen, beyond the smoke and mist. Legend may amplify, but the truth seems to have been that Mrs. Besant entered the world as unnoticed and unrecognized as any other great man or woman.

The family of which she thus became a member was essentially middle class. The Woods had been Devonshire farmers, but they had years before given up land and gone into commerce, where some of them had done very well indeed. One, Matthew Wood, became Lord Mayor of London; and what is more interesting historically, he paid, or in large part helped to pay the debts of the Duke of Kent that he might with his Duchess return to England for the birth of the future heir to the throne—later Queen Victoria; he was, like many another benefactor of royalty, economically rewarded with a baronetcy. Another, a nearer relative, made a reputation as a successful barrister, and became finally both Lord Hatherley and Lord Chancellor of England. Others had been only comparatively less successful. "In fact, all the scattered branches had made their several ways in the world, save that elder one to which my father belonged. That had vegetated on down in the country, and had grown poorer while the

others grew richer. My father's brothers had somewhat of a fight for life." One did well; another became, before he finally vanished from England, store-keeper in a Portsmouth dock-yard. In short, the family offered as a starting-place infinite possibilities. On one hand was the workhouse, on the other the House of Lords.

William Wood, the father of Annie, was half Irish by birth; he had been born and educated in Ireland, and became a medical student and took his doctor's degree there. Then, however, he was offered a commercial post in London, and never actually set up in practice. His business prospects were of the best, but he was, it may be surmised, a man educated rather than enterprising. He was a mathematician and master of many languages, but not a scholar only; his study of philosophy had made him "deeply and steadily sceptical," and though his wife did not share his beliefs, their effect upon her was liberalizing and—it was unusual in

those days—led her to stress the spirit rather than the letter of Christian teaching. Had his daughter but been subjected to his influence, or had she but been able to appreciate her mother's attitude, her whole story might have been different. As it was, he died a few days after her fifth birthday, and consequently in the following years young Annie—"little Pheasantina" as she was called—saw more of the Maurices (her mother's family) than of the Woods. From her father's side she inherited, it may be suggested, her intellectual and business abilities, her assurance, her adaptability; from her mother's her emotional qualities, her passionate nature, her capacity for feeling deeply, her sensitiveness, and, not least, her pride. The Maurices were not a wealthy family, for the father and mother in their younger days had spent what had come to them of fortune; but they, with the three daughters who alone of a large family now still lived with them in their London home, formed a "clannish" affectionate

group, proud of their ancient Irish descent—however distant and far-fetched—and finely sensitive of their honour as only those can be who have little else left to be sensitive about. They were, it appears, no less devout than they were devoted. Aunt Bessie in her younger days was engaged to a clergyman who preached without acknowledgment a sermon taken from a book. She was so shocked that then and there she broke the engagement, yet to the end of her life never married or thought of marriage with anyone else. But Annie's favourite was Aunt Minnie, a "soft pretty loving little woman," called "Co" because she was "such a cosy little thing." She was more than that, for with the exception of Mrs. Wood she was the only relative who would not desert Annie even in her extremity. This quality of loyalty may be seen too in her niece's life, as may also the determination displayed by Mrs. Wood after her husband's sudden death.

He believed that he left his wife and children

comfortably off, and on his death-bed one of his most urgent wishes was that his son Harry should receive "the best possible education." That, to the mother, meant Harrow and Cambridge. She had, however, scarcely means for her own support, yet she rejected the Woods' proposal to send him to a good city school and to start him in the commercial world backed by their influence. Instead, she went to Harrow, found lodgings there for herself and her two children, took charge of another boy, and had him and her son tutored to prepare them for the school. After several months she rented a suitable house, and obtained the consent of the Head Master of Harrow to take a number of boys there as boarders. By this means she was able both to support herself and her children and to pay her son's fees at school and university. It was a struggle not without hardship, and through much of her later life she was hampered severely by the defaulting of her lawyer; yet her daughter was allowed to know

nothing of it, to suspect nothing. Annie's life up to her marriage—and with her marriage her first intellectual awakening—was, at least in a negative sense, her happiest period. She lived in view of rather than in the world, seeing only that which she was allowed to see; she prepared rather than participated, and she dealt, even in her moments of deepest feeling, not with realities but dreams. Her father's and a younger brother's death she felt, no doubt, as sorrows, but passingly; they aroused no intellectual questioning. The first twenty years marked a period purely of development of mental and emotional powers; it was only afterwards that, in fiery contact with a brutal world, these powers began to be used.

She was, all things considered, fortunate in her schooling. The possibilities of women's education were still only beginning to be realized. The first women's college had been founded in 1843, and a second in 1849; the majority of examinations and degrees were not

yet open to women at all. The experimentation, the lack of organization or of numbers, made these colleges no place for a struggling widow's daughter. But one afternoon not long after the removal to the larger Harrow house, Annie—just eight years old—met at a friend's house "a lame lady with a strong face." She was Miss Marryat, a sister of Captain Marryat the novelist, and was both unmarried and wealthy. Left alone in the world by first her brother's and then her mother's death, she sought about her for some means by which she might occupy her leisure and, in that mild degree which satisfied so many Victorian desires for philanthropy, make herself useful in the world. She began by adopting a niece, intending to educate her thoroughly. Then she met little Annie Wood, and it occurred to her that she would rather teach two than one, and that they would be companions for one another. Thus real education began. It was, for a girl at that time, a liberal one. Miss Marryat, old-

fashioned perhaps in her ideas, was to an unusual degree modern in her methods, depending upon the cultivation of the intelligence rather than the memory, and upon training especially the faculties of observation. She had "a great horror of children learning by rote things they did not understand, and then fancying they knew them."

For some five or six years the girl spent the greater part of each year at Charmouth, on the Devonshire border of Dorset, returning to Harrow at regular intervals for holidays. In the spring of 1861 Miss Marryat decided to take a nephew to Germany to receive special medical treatment, and asked that Annie should accompany her. Three months were spent at Bonn, a brief period in England again, and then the winter in Paris. There, in the following spring, took place an important event in the young girl's life—her confirmation by the Bishop of Ohio.

Even so early—she was now fourteen—re-

ligion had come to play a large part in her life. The subject was at that time one of the few "serious" hobbies open to girls; there they could at least pretend to touch significant realities, there could find a comparatively innocuous outlet for their awakening emotions. When she was still at home, not eight years old, her imagination had been fired by *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost*. Knights with red-cross shields, dragons invariably defeated, "a beautiful Divine Prince to smile at you when the battle was over"—these filled her waking dreams. Soon she read "tales of the early Christian martyrs, and passionately regretted I was born so late when no suffering for religion was practicable; I would spend many an hour in day-dreams, in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake; one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became

a great religious leader.... I used to fret that I was born so late when all the grand things had been done, and when there was no chance of preaching and suffering for a new religion." And from the age of eight the training of Miss Marryat—strictest of Evangelicals—stressed this side of her character to the extent of making her morbid and low-spirited. In Paris in 1862 she discovered for the first time, and was profoundly affected by, "the sensuous enjoyment that lay in introducing colour and fragrance and pomp into religious services, so that the gratification of the æsthetic emotions became dignified with the garb of piety." For the Divine Prince of earlier years she substituted "the deeper attractiveness of the suffering Saviour of Men. Keble's *Christian Year* took the place of *Paradise Lost,* and as my girlhood began to bud towards womanhood, all its deeper currents set in the direction of religious devotion." The confirmation was a great event; the long and serious preparation, the

prayers, her mother's special visit to Paris, the actual "laying on of hands," the excitement, the emotional pitch, heightened with every added solemnity.

She must have possessed unusual if not remarkable intelligence. At five years of age she could read easily and found in books her principal amusement; it was a taste she never lost, and when in 1863—she was sixteen then—her formal education ceased, she immediately devoted her leisure to study and reading. At Harrow, again the happiest of girls, she was if "light-hearted" also "serious-brained," and for her partners at dances and sports—croquet and archery were fashionable just then—she preferred those who "could talk as well as flirt." Away from Miss Marryat she took her religion a little less solemnly but certainly not less seriously; only an unusual enthusiasm drove girls, even then, to make the Fathers of the Early Christian Church their chief companions, and to pore over "the Shepherd of Hermas, the

Epistles of Polycarp, Barnabas, Ignatius, and Clement, the commentaries of Chrysostom, the Confessions of Augustine. With these I studied the writings of Pusey, Liddon, and Keble, with many another smaller light, joying in the great conception of a Catholic Church . . . and I myself a child of that Holy Church. The hidden life grew stronger, constantly fed by these streams of study; weekly communion became the centre round which my devotional life revolved, with its ecstatic meditation, its growing intensity of conscious contact with the Divine; I fasted, according to the ordinances of the Church; occasionally flagellated myself to see if I could bear physical pain," made Christ more and more the central figure of her devotions. These matters were not indeed her only interest—she read a few stray scientific works, was delighted by a translation of Plato, and of the *Iliad* and Dante, disliked Wordsworth and Cowper and all the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets, though she read them conscien-

tiously through. Southey, Spenser, and Milton were favourites. Of novels she knew few, and these by Scott and Kingsley, not Miss Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood. Her only emotional outlets were her family and her religion. The ideals of her youth were "my mother and the Christ." From the one she hated always to be parted; to the other she prayed: "Blessed art Thou, O most merciful God, who did vouchsafe to espouse me to the heavenly Bridegroom in the waters of Baptism, and hast imparted Thy body and blood as a new gift of espousal and the meet consummation of Thy love.... Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth; for Thy love is better than wine." She had no thought for human lovers, and men were to her only friends. The life of the Sister of Mercy, secluded from the world, devoted to God, became ever more attractive to her. Side by side with her increasing studies she had retained an "absolute ignorance of all evil things." Her mother had sheltered and pro-

tected her—all too well, for it was just this ignorance, combined with religious enthusiasm which it aided and exaggerated, which betrayed her to her most unfortunate marriage.

Already, at this point, may be seen in her the characteristic traits which were to shape her life—the fundamental emotionalism appearing in her devotion first to her mother and second to the figure of her God; the longing to make of herself a sacrifice, a personal and dramatic sacrifice by martyrdom. Religion to her thus far was no salvation from the sorrows and terrors of life—of these she knew nothing, and what she sought in sacrifice was simply the emotional pleasure of giving. It was at this time the primary impulse, but there may be noted too in her character the intellectual curiosity, the conscientious way in which she pursued her studies, and her sheer capacity for assimilation. Without all these qualities—they were to be developed, but never essentially added to—Annie Wood could never have be-

come the Annie Besant the world knows to-day. As things were, they drew her directly onward to her destiny.

The whole story of the circumstances leading to the marriage is a typical comedy of Victorian rectitude; like too many such comedies it was to end tragically. Aunt Minnie had become interested towards the end of 1865 in a little mission church in a very poor district of Clapham near the Maurices' home; and she and her sisters, aided by their niece, then upon a visit to them, "decorated the church, worked ornaments for it, and thought we were serving God when we were really amusing ourselves in a small place where our help was over-estimated, and where the clergy, very likely unconsciously, flattered us for our devotion." There, early in 1866, Annie met an under-master from a London grammar-school who had just taken orders and was assisting at the services. He was Frank Besant, younger brother of the Walter Besant later to become famous as a novelist, a

young Cambridge man, not unhandsome probably in an ascetic way, and invested moreover as a priest with a glamour resulting much more from his office than from any personal qualities. Ill-luck brought them together again for a brief holiday, probably at St. Leonards, where each summer the Woods visited "the far unfashionable end, right away from the gay watering-place folk." They were the only young members of the party, and consequently much in each other's company. That he should be attracted by the handsome, intelligent, lively girl was not surprising, nor perhaps that he should misinterpret her admiration; he proposed to her only an hour before his departure —he did more than propose, he horrified her by taking her consent for granted. Her pride was hurt by the implied accusation of flirting, she hesitated in her first impulse of refusal, and while she stood silent he bound her to secrecy until he himself could speak to her mother— and hurried away to catch his train. In the

weeks that followed upbringing and temperament combined to thrust her upon the wrong path. Even at so important a moment the fear of a dishonorable action kept her from speaking of the matter to her mother, and when at last she met Frank Besant again and refused to be silent longer it was then too late.

"Out of sheer weakness and fear of inflicting pain I drifted into an engagement with a man I did not pretend to love. 'Drifted' is the right word, for two or three months passed, on the ground that I was so much of a child, before my mother would consent to a definite engagement; my dislike of the thought of marriage faded before the idea of becoming the wife of a priest, working ever in the Church and among the poor." Her best impulses were precisely those which were driving her on. "I had no outlet for my growing desire for usefulness in my happy and peaceful home-life, where all religious enthusiasm was regarded as unbalanced and unbecoming; all that was deepest

and truest in my nature chafed against my easy, useless days, longed for work, yearned to devote itself, as I read women saints had done, to the service of the Church and of the poor, to the battling against sin and misery—what empty names sin and misery then were to me! 'You will have more opportunities for doing good as a clergyman's wife than anything else,' was one of the pleas urged on my reluctance." She became, in fact, a clergyman's wife simply for lack of any more promising profession. She might have preferred the "religious life" as a Sister of Mercy, but that was impracticable. Other usefulness for a girl of her class and in her position there could normally be none.

One attempt she did make to end the engagement, but this time her mother's pride, blinding her to all possible consequences, would not allow Annie to "dishonour" herself by breaking her word. The marriage took place in December, 1867.

* * *

The entire period of Mrs. Besant's married life was one of struggle towards both personal and intellectual freedoms. Had the demands of the two not been coincident it might have been neither so prolonged nor so persistent. But she had in her ignorance given hostages to fortune which were only to be redeemed after long and painful conflict. She entered the state of matrimony, in her case anything but blessed, an ignorant girl; she emerged a determined woman. Marriage was her first experience of the realities of living, of sorrow, of suffering, of shame, of conscious dependence. She married the Rev. Frank Besant primarily because she was forced by circumstances into doing so; she allowed herself so to be forced—as has been made clear—because he was a clergyman. As W. T. Stead phrased it: she could not become the Bride of Heaven, therefore she became the bride of Mr. Besant—and he was not an adequate substitute. It is always dangerous to test an ideal, a religious ideal most of all;

in this case there was scarcely a propitious circumstance. They were as little suited to one another as they were in love, he "with very high ideas of a husband's authority and a wife's submission, holding strongly to the master-in-my-own-house theory, thinking much of the details of home arrangements, precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased"; she, on the other hand, "accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive, very hot-tempered, and as proud as Lucifer," knowing nothing of housekeeping and indeed not caring much, more intent upon her books than her duties. She married entirely ignorant of sex, and the shock of discovering the marriage relation seems to have been considerable.

But the possibilities of disruption went even further—and deeper. It has been noted by many as a coincidence that the Easter of 1866, when she first met her future husband, should have been also the occasion of her first religious doubts. She had set out piously to write

for her own devotional use a brief history of the days preceding the Crucifixion, compiled from the Four Gospels. She was horrified to find that they would not agree, that the accounts were not the same. How then, she asked, could they be inspired? Doubt of the letter turned to doubt of the spirit, of the Gospels as a whole; but not for long. She knew even then that there were men, holding prominent places in the Church some of them, who doubted the Bible's literal and historical accuracy, but she regarded such heretics with horror; she was in 1866 as intolerant as any—the stuff of martyrs is the stuff of which inquisitors are made. "To doubt was sin, and to have doubted on the very eve of the Passion was an added crime." The remedy was—not further examination, but a fast! The incident psychologically was a minor one; it did not lead necessarily beyond itself. But the pitfall was only covered, not closed; it was, later, to become a trap for desperate feet. Another incident in itself no more important,

yet significant potentially, took place only a month or two before the wedding. Annie was staying with friends in Manchester when five Irishmen—Fenians—were tried for the shooting of a policeman. They were defended by her host, "Lawyer Roberts," a Radical well known in the city for his readiness to fight a poor man's battle without payment. She saw the trial as it were from within, and what was largely a political issue was revealed to her as essentially a human one. Her sympathies no less than her doubts would certainly have been regarded distastefully by her conservative and conventional husband, obedient as he was to authority, and sensitive to public opinion. Change in such a case is painful enough when it has affection and understanding to help it through; where it has neither the position is doubly hopeless from the beginning.

Their circumstances were not helpful. He had obtained a mastership in a Cheltenham school, and they went there to live in lodgings;

she, finding theology and politics and science much more to her taste than the talk of babies and housemaids favoured by local society, was very much alone. She gave her time to reading and, for the first time seriously, to writing, producing in the next few months with typical industry a number of "lives of the Black-letter Saints," a pamphlet advocating the Christian duty of fasting, several short stories, some of which were printed by *The Family Herald*, and finally a novel which was rejected by the editor of that paper as "too political." Yet it must have revealed a certain degree of merit, for he suggested that another of "purely domestic interest" would in all probability find acceptance. It was, of course, never written; his young contributor was attracted intrinsically not to domestic but to political things. It is possible that the break with her husband, though it might have been a lesser break, would have come sooner than it did had not her son been born in January, 1869, and her daughter

nineteen months later. She ceased to fret continuously for her mother, and her studies became the less fevered now that she had once more a specific object upon which to expend her pent-up emotions. Some such relief was probably necessary. Previous to marriage her passionate nature had slumbered, found an outlet in dreams or thoughts of the future. Now passive had become positive; there was, it became apparent, no future save such as she herself might fashion. It is doubtful whether, at the birth of her second child, Mabel, she discerned a future in any way worth looking forward to.

Troubles had been gathering steadily about her for many months; she was for the first time meeting them unaided, really alone. Her work as a clergyman's wife was bringing her into contact with the pains and problems of the poor; her mother, after struggling for years, had found herself plunged deeply into debt, and had been compelled to sell her home; Annie's own health had not been good, her daughter

was born prematurely and recovery was slow and the baby delicate. The latter was not many months old when, with her brother, she caught whooping-cough—which turned to bronchitis and congestion of the lungs. For weeks the child lay upon the verge of death and yet could not die; her mother prayed for her death, that she might be taken rather than tortured, yet still she lived and suffered—and at last recovered, leaving her mother to face a yet more terrible struggle.

It was the struggle—her first real struggle—for a belief in God, and the conditions of its origin and progress clearly emphasize the fact that both her belief and her rejection were emotional first and intellectual only afterward. When an intellectual doubt appeared unsupported it was easily dismissed; now under the spur of pain and indignation she began to question insistently, persistently. She would *not* be put off. The measure of her earlier faith became the measure of her present doubt. "To

me Christ was no abstract idea, but a living reality, and all my heart rose up against this Person in whom I believed, and whose individual finger I saw in my baby's agony, my own misery, the breaking of my mother's proud heart under a load of debt, and all the bitter suffering of the poor.... Instead of, like the devils, believing and trembling, I believed and hated. All the hitherto dormant and unsuspected strength of my nature rose up in rebellion; I did not yet dream of denial, but I could no longer kneel." The months that followed saw days and nights of utmost stress, almost ending once in suicide and culminating at last in a complete mental and physical breakdown. From this she recovered but to begin again, to construct a definite programme involving for the first time a reasoned justification of what she should believe. Or refuse to believe—for though she may fearfully have desired to discover justification, she had in fact already made her emotional rejection. This Mrs. Besant

herself sees clearly: "The points that I set myself to study were those which would naturally be first faced by anyone whose first rebellion against the dogmas of the Churches was a rebellion of the moral nature rather than of the intellectual, a protest of the conscience rather than of the brain.... It was the uprising of an outraged conscience that made me a rebel against the Churches and finally an unbeliever in God." The points were originally four, involving the problems of eternal punishment, the meaning of "goodness" and "love" as applied to a God responsible for the sin and misery of the world, the nature of Christ's atonement and the "justice" of God in accepting vicarious suffering and vicarious righteousness, and, last, the inspiration of the Bible. The "deeper problems" of the "deity of Christ, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul," were not yet arising though they were clearly foreshadowed, for she had "resolved to take Christianity as it had been taught in the Churches, and

carefully and thoroughly examine its dogmas one by one, so that I should never again say 'I believe' where I had not proved, and that, however diminished my area of belief, what was left of it might at least be firm under my feet."

Hers was not, inevitably, an attitude with which the Rev. Frank Besant could readily agree. To a confident believer nothing can seem so irritating and so unnecessary as the anguish of unbelief, and in a clergyman's wife it must have appeared doubly annoying—an unseemly intrusion into her husband's private preserves. There had been quarrels before, for pride and hasty temper seldom sort well together; doubtless they took on now an added note of acerbity. It may have seemed to him a partial compensation for his distresses that his wife's family influence with Lord Hatherley was able to obtain for him in 1871 the Crown living of Sibsey, in Lincolnshire. "The village was scattered over a considerable amount of ground, but the work was not heavy. The

church was one of the fine edifices for which the fen country is so famous, and the vicarage was a comfortable house with large and very beautiful gardens and paddock, and with outlying fields. The people were farmers and labourers, with a sprinkling of shopkeepers; the only 'society' was that of the neighbouring clergy, Tory and prim to an appalling extent."

Such society, naturally, did not attract her—her sympathies went much more readily to the agricultural labourers in the horrible conditions under which they lived than to the farmers who oppressed them and would give no work to a "Union man," and she devoted herself with steady application to the works of Broad Church and presently of Theistic writers. But previous illness had left her weak; she succumbed again, and upon her recovery in the following autumn—1872—went to London with her mother for a brief holiday. There she met for the first time the Rev. Charles Voysey and Thomas Scott, the latter an old man

who, after a remarkable life at the French Court and as a North American Indian, was spending both time and fortune in spreading Truth and Liberty by the free distribution of pamphlets. His house was a centre of liberal opinion, religious and political, and it was at his suggestion and for his publication that Mrs. Besant's first Free-Thought pamphlet was written.

During all that holiday she was striving to come to some decision, for she saw plainly that she must face the critical problem of Christ. If she rejected him as God, she must reject Christianity as a religion. She made while in London a final effort—it deserves mention both as an incident in her life and as showing the attitude of eminent churchmen of the day—to escape the dilemma. Pusey had been for many years a pillar of her faith; in her difficulty and at his invitation she journeyed to Oxford to see him. She found "a short, stout gentleman dressed in a cassock, looking like a comfortable

monk; but keen eyes, steadfastly gazing straight into mine, told of the force and subtlety enshrined in the fine, impressive head." Upon this occasion his "subtlety," unfortunately, was very little in evidence; "he probably saw I was anxious, shy and nervous, and he treated me as a penitent going to confession and seeking the advice of a director." He would not accept the Deity of Jesus as a question for argument, shrank at the suggestion of a possible imperfection in the character of Jesus, and urged that she had already read too much and must pray and have belief without demanding proof. He had, she felt, "no conception of the struggles of a sceptical spirit; . . . he would as soon have committed suicide as have doubted of the infallibility of the 'Universal Church.' "

" 'It is not your duty to ascertain the truth,' he told me, sternly. 'It is your duty to accept and believe the truth as laid down by the Church. At your peril you reject it. The responsibility is not yours so long as you dutifully

accept that which the Church has laid down for your acceptance. Did not the Lord promise that the presence of the Spirit should be ever with His Church, to guide her into all truth?'

" 'But the fact of the promise and its value are just the very points on which I am doubtful,' I answered.

"He shuddered. 'Pray, pray,' he said. 'Father, forgive her, for she knows not what she says.' "

It is only charitable to suppose that he at least knew not what he said, nor the implication of her presence before him. In him and in her the Catholic spirit and the Protestant spirit faced each other, speaking different tongues, each failing totally to understand the other. Feeling that her mission had been useless, she told him that she must go home and face her difficulties, openly leaving the Church and taking the consequences. "Then for the first time his serenity was ruffled. 'I forbid you to speak

of your disbelief,' he cried. 'I forbid you to lead into your own lost state the souls for whom Christ died.' "

Upon her return to Sibsey, however, she explained her position as fully as possible to her husband; finally it was agreed that she should attend the ordinary Church services, but not Holy Communion. How long the arrangement might have continued there is no knowing; it was broken as the result of the pamphlet *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth,* by "the Wife of a Beneficed Clergyman," written by Mrs. Besant and published by Mr. Scott in 1873. Despite the carefully preserved anonymity, a relative of Mr. Besant discovered the authorship and, though he agreed with the views stated, thought the publication indiscreet. Again matters were smoothed over, but again the husband was urged to force her at least to conform to outward ceremonies. While on a visit to London with her mother she was warned that if she returned to Sibsey she must resume

attendance at Communion. She did not return, despite her mother's distress and pleading. Facts which still remain obscure enabled her brother to obtain for her a legal separation with the guardianship of her daughter and a small allowance. He offered her, in addition, a comfortable home on condition that she gave up her "heretical friends" and "kept quiet." This she refused. She sought freedom, and she was, after her bitter struggle and unhappy experiences, determined upon an absolute freedom, in which her only responsibility, intellectually at any rate, would be to herself.

* * *

When in 1873 Mrs. Besant left her husband and her home, the significance of her act was purely private and individual; when twelve years later, in 1885, she severed her connexion with Bradlaugh to become a Fabian, she did so as a public figure. The period between was that which, for better or worse, determined her

course, when she made discovery of her unique powers as a lecturer, pamphleteer, propagandist, organizer, when she for the first time gave full reign to her boundless energy, when she was freed, however painfully, from the last of her limiting burdens, freed that she might pursue her "path to Atheism" to its farthest point and thence, at first stumblingly, but with a gathering sureness, return. Her progress during this period may be followed upon two levels —on the one hand the religious, on the other the "social-political." They are connected throughout, but not always obviously or directly, the spirit often flying ahead where the brain, bound by material considerations, still lagged behind. The principle she fought for was the same, upon one level for freedom in thought, upon the other for freedom in action —against all oppression whether of Church or State. In pamphlet after pamphlet she pleaded for the weak against the strong, for the individual against authority. Sometimes she may

have been mistaken in attitude or in fact; that makes no difference—the spirit remains unaffected.

It is this stress upon the spirit involved rather than the facts and figures which marks very largely a difference almost in the nature of belief to-day when set suddenly beside the religious controversies of the seventies. Then, the form of belief was of primary importance; to-day, it interests us not for its own sake, but in its relation to the believer. To-day it is the fact rather than the form of Mrs. Besant's belief or unbelief to which we turn our attention; its significance is sought in relation not to an eternal truth but to herself. A belief then seemed important according as it was judged right or wrong; to-day we think of it rather as effective or ineffective as a mode of self-realization. The controversies as to "biblical biology," "eternal punishment," the Devil, and immortality have ceased in any large degree to signify, and it would be a task as useless as it

would be tedious to examine and summarize the old arguments one by one. The Church, as far as one can discover, never found for Mrs. Besant a worthy opponent; she was scorned, perhaps, with the scorn of the ostrich whose head is well and truly buried. Yet she stood for a greater force than it imagined. Her own work had, it is true, more than a touch of the barrenness of the pamphleteer, from whom all is poured forth, and for whom speed rather than ripeness is all. The pamphleteer is essentially a journalist, and suffers the same disabilities. Again and again by both parties the essential points are thrust aside in favour of mere verbal quibbling, in which the last thing they wish for is to meet upon the same ground.

The spiritual evolution of Mrs. Besant, as a whole, it will be necessary to examine, however briefly, later; there is no need to follow her progress step by step through her study of the Old and New Testaments and her doubts of their inspiration, to her arrival presently at a

questioning of the nature and existence of God. What is important is to know that she had come by 1875 not only to a complete rejection of Christianity, but to as complete an acceptance of an Atheism based upon the intellectual as the final judgment. She asserted as her principles "the refusal to believe without evidence, and the declaration that anything 'behind phenomena' is unknowable to man as at present constituted." The rejection was complete before, the acceptance only became so after, her meeting with Charles Bradlaugh in August, 1874. The essential fact of her change was a turning from God to Man, to a belief in Man, "in man's redeeming powers; in man's remoulding energy; in man's approaching triumph, through knowledge, love, and work." She sought in her new belief, though liberty, no element of licence; in her lectures delivered for the National Secular Society during these years "no subject was more frequently dealt with than that of human ethical growth and the duty of

man to man. No thought was more constantly in my mind than that of the importance of morals."

It was to a very great extent this intimate relation she asserted between belief and ethics, and consequently politics and behaviour, that raised against her the opposition of society. It was useless, she taught, to seek reward in a future life; heaven must be won here, now. Man must live for good, yet neither humble nor submissive to authority; the ideal was "the free man who knows no lord, who brooks no tyranny, who relies on his own strength, who makes his brother's quarrel his, proud, true-hearted, loyal, brave." Thus Atheism and Radicalism were, for her, directly connected: "To whom then is Atheism dangerous? It is dangerous to the unfairly wealthy, to those who regard human beings as machines to win gold for their masters; to them it is dangerous, for Atheism means justice. It is dangerous to superstition, to ignorance, and to the classes

that prey upon the credulity of their neighbours; to them it is dangerous, for Atheism means knowledge. It is dangerous to the oppressor, to the tyrant who builds his throne out of the bodies of the slain citizens, and who twines his crown out of the thorns of their distress; to him it is dangerous, for Atheism means Liberty. It recognizes no king in heaven and no king on earth; it knows naught of a priesthood and naught of a right divine. Marvel not, then, that against Atheism should arise all monopoly of privilege, all possession of ill-gotten gains, all tyranny in the Church and State. Marvel not that against Atheism kings fulminate laws and priests thunder damnation; for Atheism shakes every throne and undermines every church. Atheism strikes at every mitre and Atheism shivers every crown."

That passage is also, it might be noted, quite a typical example of her readily flowing, essentially rhetorical style of the period. It is in-

clined to-day to seem stilted; lacking the passion which informed it, we lack too its confidence.

When she left home Mrs. Besant was still in transition. What the future was to be she did not certainly know; only she was determined upon freedom. She refused, then, as has been told, her brother's offer of a home, and sought, sadly inexperienced, for "something to do." The employment open to women was, however, singularly limited, and for a clergyman's wife living apart from her husband even more limited than usual. She made vain attempts in one or two "genteel" occupations —some weeks of fancy needlework earned just four-and-sixpence!—and then, having arranged to take a house with her mother in Upper Norwood in the spring, accepted an invitation to her grandmother's and aunts' home at Folkestone. There in the house of the local vicar she found employment for the winter, as "head-cook, governess, and nurse," but with the

spring came a dreadful destruction of her plans. Her mother was taken ill, and it was soon evident that she was dying. She died two days after moving into the new house, upon May 10th. It was during her illness that Mrs. Besant took the Sacrament for the last time. Her mother was most anxious to communicate, but she refused to unless her daughter did so too. Two clergymen, the circumstances having been explained to them, would do nothing; she went then in despair to Dean Stanley, and told him everything frankly. He was, to her vast astonishment and relief, sufficiently unorthodox to agree to her request, and even to assert that conduct was more important—"far more important"—than theory, and that he "regarded all as Christians who recognized and tried to follow the moral law of Christ." So great was her surprise at this that, later, she ventured to ask him how, with his views, he found it possible to remain in the Church. "I think," he told her, "that I am of more service to true

religion by remaining in the Church and striving to widen its boundaries from within, than if I left it and worked from without." When, many years later, Stead told Canon Liddon the story of this last communion, "he almost shuddered with horror at the sacrilege to which he conceived the Dean had been a guilty party."

The months immediately following her mother's death, Mrs. Besant has said, were the dreariest of her life; she had poverty as well as sorrow to struggle against, and only her daughter's companionship, with the work she did for Thomas Scott—a series of Free-Thought pamphlets—and the friendship of himself and his wife enabled her to conquer. Even so, what little jewelry she had was sold to provide food, which she herself often went without; she learnt then, she says, to know what hunger is, to have sympathy for the poor. It was her darkest hour; the meeting with Bradlaugh marked the beginning of a dawn which was to grow brighter and brighter, wider

and wider, heralding a sun which would rise higher and higher, despite all prophecies, all attacks, and remain obstinately aloft, defying all probabilities, all laws of time and space, without a setting even to the present day.

* * *

The first contact of Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant took place at a time peculiarly fitting; she was doubly alone after her mother's death, and his friend of many years, Austin Holyoake, had died that same spring. She came to him as a new comrade to take the older one's place. "They were mutually attracted," his daughter has recorded, "and a friendship sprang up between them of so close a nature that had both been free it would undoubtedly have ended in marriage." For Mrs. Besant especially the union just at this moment was fortunate. She had discovered in herself both the will and the power; he came to her as the vehicle by which she might rise to fame if not to fortune. His

was. in many ways, a figure scarcely less remarkable than hers. "Of Bradlaugh," says Mr. Bernard Shaw, "history has so far given every description except the only one that fits him. He was quite simply a hero: a single champion of anti-Christendom against the seventy-seven champions of Christendom. He was not a leader: he was a wonder whom men followed and obeyed. He was a terrific opponent, making his way by an overwhelmingly personal force which reduced his most formidable rivals to pygmies." He had risen to prominence against all opposition and by his own efforts; he had built up his Free-Thought organization in the National Secular Society, and possessed in the weekly *National Reformer* his own newspaper. What Mrs. Besant might or might not have done without his aid it is impossible to surmise; what is to the point is that under his guidance she made her first sallies into public controversy.

She had had at first the usual prejudice of

persons of her class against him, but seeing him and hearing him lecture at the Hall of Science in Old Street, whither she went one day in August, 1874, to receive her certificate as a new member of the National Secular Society, she was impressed at once by "the grave, quiet, stern, strong face, the massive head, the keen eyes, the magnificent breadth and height of forehead," and still more by the knowledge and moderation displayed in his address. A few days later she visited him at his London lodging and became forthwith a contributor to *The National Reformer* at a weekly salary of one guinea. He gave her first fair warning of what would follow, that "he was so hated by English society that any friend of his would be certain to suffer, and that I should pay heavily for any friendship extended to him." His warning was justified, as will be seen; the great British public —its more respectable sections especially—began to draw its usual generous conclusions, and "harlot," she says, was not the worst of titles

privately and publicly awarded her. Even in 1891 Stead could write of her as one "to whom, until the other day, it was considered hardly correct to allude, except in the most distant manner, as if she inhabited another and improper world."

Bradlaugh's influence seems to have been primarily practical. He set before her an example of what patience, strength, and certainty may accomplish. Spiritually he was too rigid; when they met he was already "set," while she was still developing. For a time his effect upon her must have been profound, but her destiny was beyond his. He educated her in public attack and defence, taught her the importance of understanding all sides of a case, but he could not limit her. Her "quick impulsive nature found in him the restful strength it needed, and learned from him the self-control it lacked."

In that same August, but toward the end of the month, she gave her first public lecture. It dealt with "The Political Status of Women"—

of course upon Radical lines—and Bradlaugh thought it "probably the best speech by a woman" he had ever listened to. She followed it almost at once with another, then went to Northampton to work for him—but not as a speaker—during a by-election. It was a tempestuous typical episode, a foretaste of the essentially heroic battle against slander and violence, and the sheer weight of human prejudice, which their comradeship was to be. The year ended with Bradlaugh in America and Mrs. Besant ill once more with congestion of the lungs. Recovered, she resolved still further to extend her activities, "to give myself wholly to propagandist work, as a Free-Thinker and a Social Reformer, and to use my tongue as well as my pen in the struggle.... The desire to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry, to make the world freer and better than I found it—all this impelled me with a force that would not be denied. I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the

battlefield: 'Who will go? Who will speak for me?' And I sprang forward with passionate enthusiasm, with resolute cry: 'Here am I, send me!' " This was the essential spirit in which both Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant faced the enemy. It was, as Shaw says, simply heroic, and like most heroes they had no doubts of themselves. Mrs. Besant has been accused many times of caring little for criticism. How should she, when she knows always that she is right? Had she lacked such certainty she would never have travelled so far or so widely, never—within her limits—have been so formidable an opponent.

It is impossible to follow her through the next few years in any detail. She went about the country, greeted alternately with cheers and stones, speaking upon religion and politics, and in each case finding herself "always in opposition to the Government of the day." An ardent Home Ruler, passionately critical of "the land question, the incidence of taxation,

the cost of royalty, the obstructive power of the House of Lords," and of "our aggressive and oppressive policy in Ireland, in the Transvaal, in India, in Afghanistan, in Burma, in Egypt," she strove "to touch the consciences of the people and to make them feel the immorality of a land-stealing, piratical policy. Against war, against capital punishment, against flogging, demanding national education instead of big guns, public libraries instead of warships, no wonder I was denounced as an agitator, a firebrand, and that all orthodox society turned up at me its most respectable nose." Upon many of these issues it would do so still, yet not quite so pointedly, without so entire a certainty —to that extent at least Mrs. Besant has not lived in vain. Bradlaugh's daughter has said of her at this period that "tireless as a worker, she could both write and study longer without rest or respite than any other person I have known; and such was her power of concentration that she could work under circumstances which

would have confounded almost every other person. Though not an original thinker, she had a really wonderful power of absorbing the thoughts of others, of blending them, and of transmuting them into glowing language. Her industry, her enthusiasm, and her eloquence made of her a very powerful ally to whatever cause she espoused." Her throat was weak at first; lecturing would, a doctor told her, either kill or cure; she improved rapidly, until she became not only a very fluent speaker with a great command of language, but a very forcible one.

The Knowlton case was for her the main event of 1877; it advertised her as nothing else could have done, and, incidentally, established the beginnings of the modern birth-control movement. It was undertaken, however, primarily in the interests of the rights of free discussion. It happened that the publisher of *The National Reformer* was also the publisher of a pamphlet written by an American doctor—a physiological treatise. Some copies were

seized by the police and the publisher prosecuted. He pleaded guilty after having made a contrary agreement with Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant, who thereupon severed all connection with him, hurriedly printed a number of copies of the pamphlet, and themselves sold them to police officers. The inevitable prosecution followed, and though Mrs. Besant was given an opportunity of withdrawal, she refused to take it—rather, it is said, to Bradlaugh's embarrassment. Not only was he blamed for bringing a woman into what was then considered a very unpleasant case, but he had to conduct the defence for two briefs instead of one. She had had at that time no experience of legal procedure, and he had to instruct her not only in what to say but in what not to say. He was proud of her determination to share victory or defeat with him, but it added to his difficulties and anxieties; they faced, both of them, imprisonment, and in that event who was to carry on *The National Reformer*—of which she was

sub-editor now—and their newly established publishing business?

Her part in the case was, nevertheless, no silent one. Her opening speech for the defence contained fully forty thousand words, Bradlaugh following with scarcely half that number. The Lord Chief Justice in his summing-up declared that "a more ill-advised and more injudicious proceeding in the way of a prosecution was probably never brought into a court of justice," but the jury, though acquitting the defendants of "corrupt motive," found them guilty of publishing a book "calculated to deprave public morals." But an appeal was lodged, and, as so often in legal cases in which Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant were involved, the verdict was quashed by a higher court. The final gain was wholly upon their side. The pamphlet had a vast advertisement, and, together with Mrs. Besant's similar work, *The Law of Population,* sold in hundreds of thousands.

She was now established more firmly than ever in the public eye, but her prominence had, while the decision in the Knowlton case was still pending, one unfortunate consequence. It became evident to conservative opinion that she was no fit guardian for her child! The Rev. Frank Besant had already made one illegal attempt to hide Mabel away from her mother during her annual visit to Sibsey; now, supported by subscriptions collected from the Bishop of Lincoln and many clergy and churchmen of the diocese, he made an application to the High Court of Chancery for the custody of the child. There were petitions and cross-petitions, but though the mother offered to pay for the girl's maintenance and education in any other hands than those of her father, the decision went against her. Mabel was taken away, and Mrs. Besant was at last utterly alone. Again illness intervened, during which her husband obtained an order forbidding her

to bring any suit against him; subsequently he denied her the agreed access to the children and stopped the money due to her. When later she was able to regain the former, he subjected her to such petty forms of insult in their presence that after a brief while she relinquished her right, justifiably confident that in womanhood her daughter would return to her. It is impossible at any point to feel much sympathy for her husband; he appears throughout as strangely vindictive, taking advantage at every point. He affords the delightful spectacle of a Christian clergyman not only taking her daughter from his wife, but also stopping his wife's very means of existence—at any rate as far as he was concerned—because she was misguided enough to disagree with his conception of the truth. Her eternal damnation was not enough for him; he desired for her also a taste of hell upon earth. No doubt he thought himself peculiarly afflicted, with a pain renewed at her every fresh outburst,

but at the same time he clung securely to the not uncomfortable living he owed simply and solely to her influence.

What Mrs. Besant had most to struggle against was the dead-weight of human prejudice. By husband and society were directed against her every kind of malign Victorian ingenuity. Now, however, their worst was accomplished, yet she was not conquered. Having taken her daughter, they could do no more. Their attacks brought her, with unhappiness, power.

* * *

Nevertheless it is clear that she was making headway. She could declare at this time that to take Mabel from her was to remove her from comfort and plenty and the company of "cultured and thoughtful" people to live among "half-educated farmers." But the path was in no sense easy; her triumph was only made possible, probably, by her unusual capacities. The minor issues for which she was fighting at this

time are, in fact, too numerous to be listed; yet her ordinary labours of producing books and pamphlets, editing *The National Reformer*, acting as secretary to the Malthusian League, lecturing several times each week in towns scattered all over the British Isles, and carrying on legal battles in the courts, failed to satisfy her, and she turned in her leisure not to rest but to "intellectual recreation." In the spring of 1879 she not only translated a substantial work from the French, but in order to improve her powers of concentration and to add to her knowledge generally began in February to study under Dr. E. B. Aveling that she might matriculate in the following June at London University. This she did. In August Dr. Aveling was dismissed from the Chair of Comparative Anatomy at the London Hospital as a result of his public adhesion to the National Secular Society; two classes were thereupon established under his direction at the Science and Art Department at South Kensington, and others were rapidly

added. Mrs. Besant, to give what assistance she might, qualified as a science teacher in eight subjects, and taught in the classes regularly until 1888, though against considerable opposition. Upon one occasion she was refused admission to the garden of the Royal Botanic Society because the daughters of the curator also made use of it.

But the great battle of the early eighties was that between Bradlaugh and Parliament. After twelve years' work in the constituency he had been elected as a member for Northampton in April, 1880. There was a cry of horror from certain sections of the community, followed by an equal delight when he conscientiously delivered himself into the hands of his enemies by claiming his optional right to affirm rather than take the oath. There was a great to-do. Select committees were appointed, the House voted on the matter, delivered orders (which, sturdily constitutional, he refused to obey because he held them to be "against the law"), lodged him

in the Clock Tower of the House as a prisoner, and at last on July 2nd allowed him to affirm. At once his opponents took the matter to the Courts, and in 1881 the seat was declared vacant. He was re-elected, expelled from the House by force; again the seat was declared vacant, again he was re-elected—and once more refused. But liberal opinion now was coming to his support, and after a fourth election he was permitted to take his seat and the oath, and later to bring in and carry an Oaths Bill, giving members the right to affirm and bestowing other privileges upon Free-Thinkers. By 1884 his victory was complete. During this period it was in the main the donkey-work which fell upon Mrs. Besant—editing, lecturing, pamphleteering, organizing petitions—but there was one dramatic moment in August, 1881, when she followed Bradlaugh to the House at the head of a crowd of working men gathered from all parts of the country and bearing a monster petition. For a long while nothing was

heard from within by the waiting crowd; it began to grow restive, and at last a charge was made up the steps leading to the lobby—but Mrs. Besant sprang forward and begged them, for Bradlaugh's sake, to be quiet and orderly. Had she held back, or had Bradlaugh himself a few minutes later, when he was thrust out into the Palace Yard, but called upon them, then that night, says one historian, might "the multitude have taken its own way, sacked the House, and thrown, if not the Speaker and his wig, at least Lord Randolph Churchill, and Sir Stafford Northcote, and Sir Henry Woolf, comrades three, into the Thames, that ancient river and unclean."

But now another period was opening for Mrs. Besant as for Bradlaugh; the first divergence between their paths was about to appear, although their active association continued for some years. Their friendship lasted until, his daughter states, her changing opinions and activities carried her away "into close association

with persons strongly inimical to Mr. Bradlaugh and the aims to which he was devoting his life." His disappointment was very bitter. "For thirteen years she had stood upon the same platform with him; and when one day she said that for ten years she had been dissatisfied with her own teaching, he felt it very keenly." It was Socialism which first separated them—for he was an individualist by life-long conviction, while she, once her mind was fixed, could not hold back—but there was another reason. Bradlaugh had won through to acceptance; it was Mrs. Besant whose friendship carried odium now. She saw this, saw that whatever she might be without Bradlaugh, Bradlaugh was better without her.

In truth each had served the turn of the other. She had given him an aid, a companionship, an intellectual and womanly sympathy such as none other could have given him; he, on the other hand, had given her experience—she was ready now to stand alone. Yet theirs

was, as Shaw has said, a combination "so extraordinary that its dissolution was felt as a calamity, as if someone had blown up Niagara or an earthquake had swallowed a cathedral. Socialism had many colleagues to offer her who were more accomplished than Bradlaugh. One of them, William Morris, was a far greater man. But there was no platform warrior so mighty; no man who could dominate an audience with such an air of dominating his own destiny. Unhappily for him, she was right and he was wrong on the point that divided them; and when they parted, his sun set in a rosy glow of parliamentary acceptance, even by Lord George Hamilton, while hers was still stormily rising."

* * *

The events of Mrs. Besant's Socialist period —her definitely Socialist period, that is, for she still finds Theosophy and Socialism wholly compatible—are not, as far as she is concerned, particularly significant. To-day it is quite usual

to accept Socialism as the logical destination of the Radical; in the eighties it was not so, for Socialist theories were then only just undergoing a revival.

It was in 1884 that she was present at a debate between Bradlaugh and H. M. Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation. Bradlaugh, by all accounts, carried the day, though rather by personality and oratory than argument. She at least found his opponent the more convincing, began to see matters in a new light, and "soon went the length of a somewhat extreme propaganda, afterwards modified in common with the general tone of the Fabian Society, of which she speedily became the most prominent member." Her public adhesion to the new cause had an effect of suddenness and surprise; in actual fact she seems to have hesitated for some while before coming to a decision, knowing what pain it would necessarily bring to her comrades of the past. It was about this time that she first met Bernard Shaw, a

young man then, but not less Shavian, "with a perfect genius for 'aggravating' the enthusiastically earnest, and with a passion for representing himself as a scoundrel." She was taken in by his casual account of himself as a "loafer," attacked him as such, and only learned later that she owed him an apology. It was a misunderstanding which he certainly enjoyed more than she did. She went one day to a meeting which he was addressing. His speech over, she rose not to oppose but to defend him, and that evening she asked him to nominate her for election to the Fabian Society. She had already, some months before, been attacked in *The National Reformer* for the Socialist tendencies her writings there displayed, and though she did not leave the staff until 1887, and her private friendship with Bradlaugh remained unbroken, yet after her declaration "he never again felt the same confidence in my judgment as he felt before, nor did he any more consult me on his own policy."

It is doubtful whether she can ever have felt so completely and comfortably at home in the Fabian Society as she had with her former colleague. There was something essentially different in the Fabian outlook—something essentially more modern. "Comedy," to quote Shaw again, "was not her clue to life: she had a healthy sense of fun; but no truth came to her first as a joke.... Now the Fabian vein was largely the vein of comedy, and its conscience a sense of irony. We laughed at Socialism and laughed at ourselves a good deal." She remained, in some degree, always an outsider; she was a woman with a past, with a reputation earned in other and wider fields, and she was concerned with carrying the Fabian message out into those fields rather than with developing it in the Society itself. She became, consequently, "a sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger, carrying away audiences for us when the dissensions in the movement brought our policy into

conflict with that of other societies, founding branches for us throughout the country, dashing into the great strikes and free-speech agitations of that time, forming on her own initiative such *ad hoc* organizations as were necessary to make them effective, and generally leaving the routine to us and taking the fighting on herself." It was during this period that her work for Trade Unionism was mostly done, that she fought for the rights of free speech in Trafalgar Square against a persistent policy of suppression, that with Stewart Headlam she was elected to the London School Board as a progressive representative for a large East End district, and there urged the novel necessity for feeding starving children before attempting to educate them.

She had at this time, from 1883 to 1888, a sixpenny monthly of her own, *Our Corner*, the majority of whose contributors were fellow-Socialists. Throughout 1888 she ran, with W. T. Stead, another small weekly entitled *The*

Link. She had already suggested in print the need for a "new Church which should include all who have the common ground of faith in and love for man," and members of which would be "as earnest about making this world happy as they are over saving their souls." Meeting W. T. Stead, she found that he had been thinking too along the same lines. The object of *The Link*, therefore, was "to say everything," and, by exposing the injustices inflicted upon the poor, to bring together a nucleus of men and women who would work "as systematically and as cheerfully in the temple of service of man as others do in what they believe to be the service of God." It exposed starvation wages, unjust landlords and employers, cruelty to children, insanitary workshops, extortion; it fought for the sweated dockers, raised funds to feed starving children, published facts concerning the wages of match-girls, organized and won strikes for them and for other illegally oppressed workers. She, in particular, went

everywhere, saw everything, and hid nothing. Webb, Shaw, the Blands, Graham Wallas, William Morris, Cunninghame-Graham, John Burns, George Lansbury, Stead, Headlam, Edward Pease, Edward Carpenter, Herbert Burrows—these were her comrades then. Her work at this time is better remembered to-day than that of almost any other period, partly because the majority of those who shared in it are still living, and many of them prominent, partly perhaps because more than any of her labours it was in the direct line of modern progress, because it is of the present in a sense in which Bradlaugh is of the past. Never before, possibly, had it been so extensive, so various, and so sustained, yet the more she did the more she was called upon to do, and always she responded to the call. Hard work, she said, never killed anyone.

Yet unceasing though her devotion was to her practical Socialist and other labours, she could not, and increasingly could not, conceal

from herself a growing dissatisfaction. The Socialist position, however economically sound, did not altogether suffice; she needed, for her constant inspiration, something other than a political faith. She had been for a while content simply with the negative case of Atheism against supernaturalism. Then she had turned to scientific work, and for "ten years of patient and steadfast study I sought along the lines of Materialistic Science for answer to the questions on Life and Mind to which Atheism, as such, gave no answer." From biology her interest had shifted to psychology, yet she could find nowhere "one gleam of light on the question of questions: What is Life? What is Thought?" She went further, into problems of hypnotism, clairvoyance, the phenomena of spiritualism, dreams, illusions, telepathy, and the further she went the more inadequate seemed the materialistic hypotheses. "Materialism not only could not answer, but declared an answer impossible. There was no question of

waiting—but of resigning all hope of finding a new road." That left for Mrs. Besant no alternative; to stand still was to perish: the quest for the new road began.

By the spring of 1889 she had gone far, though still without promise of success. She travelled not altogether alone, and now and then she encountered writings which showed her that others were exploring in the same directions—yet it must have been a lonely path as far as the majority of her comrades and friends were concerned, and she seems to have talked little of it to others. Early in 1889 she had a definite experience. "In the beginning of the year, before I joined the Theosophical Society, I was making desperate efforts to pierce the darkness, and was seeking with passionate earnestness to obtain some direct evidence of the existence of the soul and of the superphysical world; one evening as I sat alone, concentrating my mind on this longing, I heard the Master's voice—but knew not whose it was—

and after some questions asked by him and answered by me, came the promise that I should soon find the light." It was, she says, a promise quickly fulfilled. Scarcely a fortnight passed before Stead asked her to review for the *Pall Mall Gazette* the two large volumes of *The Secret Doctrine,* by H. P. Blavatsky. He thought that she, with her queer interests, might care for them. She did, they engrossed her; she read them through day after day, and as she read she "remembered, and the whole philosophy fell into order before me, although to this brain and in this body it came before me for the first time." Here, recognized instantly, was the revelation for which she had been seeking, the explanation not merely of the relations between but the causes of phenomena, the bridge between matter and thought revealed at last. She obtained, immediately, an introduction to the author, and only a few days later went with her friend and fellow-worker Herbert Burrows to meet Madame Blavatsky.

That eccentric lady was, apparently, upon her best behaviour; there was "nothing special to record, no word of Occultism, nothing mysterious, a woman of the world chatting with her evening visitors." Only at the last moment did she pass beyond "the easy brilliant talk," and then, with a sudden emotion in her voice, said simply: "Oh, my dear Mrs. Besant, if you would only come among us!" Mrs. Besant's first impulse was to yield, but both pride and caution held her back. Could she "face the shame of publicly confessing" that she had been wrong, "misled by intellect to ignore the soul?" Could she estrange her friends, her comrades? More, public opinion was, even then, beginning to realize the value of her work, prejudice was dying down in important quarters; it was being acknowledged that she had won her spurs in righteous battles; must she, once again, "plunge into a new vortex of strife?" The conflict was a bitter one, if brief, but it could have only one ending. It must have been fought out in silence

and alone, and her decision came with startling suddenness even to her intimate friends. Bradlaugh first read of it in a weekly paper, and his faith in her judgment, already shaken, now utterly failed. Bernard Shaw has related how one day he was in the editorial office of the *Star*, talking to H. W. Massingham, and glancing at proofs scattered about a table. "One of them was headed 'Why I Became a Theosophist.' I immediately looked down to the foot of the slip for the signature, and saw that it was Annie Besant." He was "staggered by this unprepared blow, which meant to me the loss of a powerful colleague and of a friendship which had become part of my daily life," instantly rushed round to her near-by office in Fleet Street, "and there delivered myself of an unbounded denunciation of Theosophy in general, of female inconsistency, and in particular of H. P. Blavatsky." He strove to puzzle her, to strike her through her pride and seriousness, to rouse her to indignation. For the first time

in all their friendship his tactics failed. "This time I met my match. She listened to me with complete kindness and genuine amusement, and then said that she had become a vegetarian (as I was) and that perhaps it had enfeebled her mind. In short, she was for the first time able to play with me; she was no longer in the grip of her pride; she had after many explorations found her path and come to see the universe and herself in their real perspective."

3

MRS. BESANT has been compared by her opponents to a stage-player who retreats continually behind the scenes to reappear each time in a new character. It seems fairly clear, however, that though her changes may have been somewhat suddenly announced, they have seldom been suddenly arrived at, and that in point of fact there have been two real changes only, from Christianity to Atheism, and from Atheism to Theosophy—a progress which might be paralleled in its general significance if not in its details by many prominent contemporary figures. Religious thought in the earlier and middle parts of the nineteenth century underwent a romantic reaction against the earlier rationalism, and after 1850 or so this romanticism, with the rise to power of the middle classes and its consequent democratization, suf-

fered an increasing debasement. What was in its essence comprehensible only to the few had to be made palatable to the many, and what was defensible (possibly) in the realms of high philosophy became intellectually revolting as interpreted to the multitude. Throughout the century there was too, very largely in consequence of scientific discovery, a shattering of the settled moulds of thought, a steady process which sometimes found a paradoxical expression in the acceptance even by intelligent persons of a crude and complete dogmatism. Fearful lest they should be crushed by the falling pillars of their faith, they shut their eyes and denied that the pillars fell; it became necessary for faith and knowledge to disclaim acquaintance, to walk one upon either side of the road. Yet the process went on; it was a changed world to which each new generation opened its eyes.

Three courses were open. It was possible, with the churches, to thrust out science, to ac-

cept authority blindly; it was possible, with Bradlaugh and the Free-Thinkers, to reject all save the purely ethical aspect of religious teaching, to devote thought and energy to coping simply with the world and its complex problems; or it was possible, though this was most difficult of all, to attempt the effecting of a new harmony between scientific knowledge and religious idealism, a harmony at once intellectually and emotionally satisfying. Speaking generally, it may be said that all these have had their period of favour—or rather that the first has been tried and discarded, the second tried and discarded, and that it is the third which is today exercising the attention of those to whom religion is not only a fact but an essential fact.

Mrs. Besant, indeed, in adopting each in turn, was only showing the world (though not for the first time) the way it would inevitably go. She was in the beginning a Christian by accident of birth and tradition, and certainly emotionally rather than spiritually. A point of

evidence drove her to doubt, a personal emotional crisis enforced the application of that doubt, and faith became intellectually impossible to her; she rejected it not wilfully, but because she could do nothing else. The rejection was, like much of nineteenth-century rationalism, a revolt of the individual against authority, a claim in fact for the individual's absolute mental and spiritual autonomy. She rejected specifically the ideal of "the slave, poor, meek, broken-spirited, humble, submissive to authority, however oppressive and unjust," and put forward instead the ideal of "the free man who knows no lord, who brooks no tyranny, who relies upon his own strength, who makes his brother's quarrel his, proud, true-hearted, loyal, brave." She asserted the masculine over the feminine ideal, the ideal of the West above that of the East; it might be imagined that she looked forward to a time when all spiritual authority would be set aside, when the free human spirit would be able no longer to accept

seriously, or to need, metaphysical forms imposed from without, that she would agree with Count Hermann Keyserling[1] that "the developed individual believes in himself—in 'the God in him'—or else he does not believe at all, he simply *is*, for, where the consciousness of being is fully developed, being and belief coincide."

It was, in fact, a position she could not sustain, perhaps because she lacked the final degree of development. "All religious belief," says Keyserling, "has only one significance, that of leading to self-realization; it means the imaginative exposition of being, the mirror of the centre of being in our consciousness. Undeveloped human beings must believe in something external, because they have no other means of focussing their powers, of condensing them to dynamic unity." Mrs. Besant's life might very well be presented simply as a quest for a more effective external form of belief by which she could the more efficiently focus her

[1] *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.).

powers, condense them to dynamic unity. But another additional cause was equally cogent, one might suggest: she based her position altogether upon the "cold, calm reasoning" of the intellectual consciousness, and she found that, as others have found it, insufficient as a measure of reality. There are problems it will not answer, doubts it cannot satisfy. So she came, following the instinctive path of the "driven" soul, to the third choice. She had proved the intellectual apprehension of reality inadequate; now she strove to step beyond it to a deeper instinctive knowledge which would at the same time be intellectually satisfying.

It was, possibly for the reason just suggested, a step she could not take, suffering as she did the defects of her own qualities, paying with a lack of spiritual repose for intellectual strength and energy, with lack of fineness for her ardour, with lack of sympathy, with even occasional bitterness, for her absolute devotions. She could not leap the gulf which yawned be-

fore her—rather, she fell into it. Later, H. G. Wells was to make essentially the same failure, and in doing so to discover his unfortunate Invisible King; Mrs. Besant, more thorough if less original, emerged bearing the banner of Theosophy. She began, if not to deceive herself, at least to make a denial of all for which she had previously stood by a dogmatic acceptance—for that Theosophy, as accepted by her, is not dogmatic, is scarcely to be maintained.

4

SOME account, however brief, of the beginnings and general progress of the Theosophical Society seems necessary at this point; it is drawn from various Theosophical sources—mainly the writings of Mrs. Besant herself. It may be said, for all practical purposes, to have owed its existence to Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian lady of aristocratic origin and erratic nature, who after marrying at seventeen left her husband hurriedly and for many years followed an uncharted course about the globe. In August, 1851, she met one moonlit night beside the Serpentine—it was at the time of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park—"the Master of her dreams," and from him learnt the purpose to which her life was to be devoted: the founding of the Society. From 1867 onward she worked definitely under the orders of the

Masters—the Brothers of "the White Lodge, the Hierarchy of Adepts who watch over and guide the evolution of humanity."[1] In America, in 1874, at the home of the Eddy brothers—spiritualists of wide but transitory fame—she met Colonel H. S. Olcott, late Special Commissioner of the United States War Department, then special investigator for a New York newspaper. He was keenly interested in spiritualism, and was attracted by her unusual psychic powers; in September, 1875, he proposed the forming of a society for the study of occult matters, was appointed president for life by the Masters themselves, and upon November 17th delivered the inaugural address in New York. They made a queer couple, she a woman both gross and ugly in her later years,

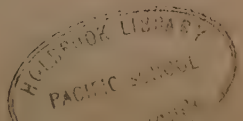
[1] In 1893 Mrs. Besant described a Master as "a living man who has evolved more rapidly than the vast majority of the human race, and has reached a stage of mental, moral and spiritual development which will be attained by the race in the future only at the end of millenniums of years. . . . In him the spiritual nature is developed and works unrestrainedly through the mental and physical, so that he has become the master of all forces in nature and can utilize them at will."

of aggressive and compelling personality, who ate too much and took too little exercise, had a vast capacity for work, and a contempt for those who did not agree with her as impatient as her humour was occasionally crude. He, on the other hand, an elderly American of the older type, complacent, perhaps a little pompous, "very honest and very vain," "patriarchal in appearance, cordial by nature," habitually preoccupied with the problem of his own pre-eminence, yet possessing considerable organizing ability. He, far more than she, seems to have been the Mother of the Society.

Upon the original foundation in 1875 there were three sections, the third consisting of the ordinary entering members, the second of those who became the pupils of Madame Blavatsky and so attained a higher stage, the first of the Masters themselves. Early in 1879 the two founders arrived in India, settling at Bombay, and there followed a period of occult phenomena which made the Society known through-

out the world. Without the phenomena, suggests Mr. G. B. Butt, "the Theosophical Society might never have developed into anything more than a diminutive New York club or a group of fanatical students in India. It was the phenomena which brought not only notoriety, but converts." They brought something more—"exposures"! In each of these the evidence upon one side strikes the investigator as being as unsatisfactory as that on the other. Numerous members became uneasy, and wondered whether it would not be better to confine their attention to Philosophy and Metaphysics, and to leave Occultism alone; the Masters, somewhat hastily, withdrew from participation, leaving only two sections in existence.

In 1885 Madame Blavatsky, seriously ill, sailed for Europe. The attacks had all centred about her, and in her absence even Olcott was persuaded to attempt the separation of the Society from her special teachings. It proved impracticable. Interest lessened, membership fell



off; the Society found it impossible to live upon the thin wine of aspiration alone—it needed the bread of a definite doctrine and a certain proof. Madame Blavatsky was its vital element, its real life; had she deserted it, one can hardly believe that it would have continued to exist at all effectively, and had there not been at her death a successor of the calibre of Mrs. Besant, it might well have succumbed even then. Theosophists all recognize that with her departure from India "necessarily the spiritual centre of the Movement was transferred to the West." In London she gathered about her a band of disciples who would "pledge themselves to serve the Masters faithfully come what may," and in fact "do what the Theosophical Society has failed to do." This band formed the original Esoteric Section of the Society. No sooner had it come into being, relates Mrs. Besant, than "the Society began to gain a larger amount of hearing in the world because more life was poured into it, although the Masters did not

take up their old position in it, nor constitute again the First Section thereof." Since 1888 it has prospered continuously. Its Esoteric Section—or Eastern School, as the Section is now called—has always been, she adds, "the Heart of the Theosophical Society," its vivifying soul, although officially the two have no connexion.

It has seemed essential thus to stress the vital occult connexion of the Society if only because the "three declared objects"—Universal Brotherhood; the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; the investigation of unexplained natural laws—are so often put forward as though they, and they alone, represented its whole nature. Bradlaugh, it has been said, might have joined it, and so, technically, he might; but for Mrs. Besant, as for Madame Blavatsky and the majority of leading if not all members, Theosophy rather than the "aims" of the Society has been all-important. The Society may be neutral, though Mrs. Besant seems to disclaim even that—Theosophy certainly is

not. The exoteric body may be committed to no religion or school of thought; the esoteric members, in addition to the three objects, are voluntarily pledged to make these objects effective in their own lives through the study and practice of Theosophy, exoteric and esoteric. All members of the esoteric group, according to Mrs. Besant, believe in the existence of Masters, and recognize an Inner Head of the School, who is a Master, and to whom they pledge absolute obedience; of recent years, she declares, the Society has taken its impulse largely from the attitude of those members who are students of the Esoteric Section. She, certainly, from the moment of her adherence, professed a complete loyalty to the Masters, Madame Blavatsky, and Theosophy. "If there are no Masters, the Theosophical Society is an absurdity, and there is no use in keeping it up." How could the Hidden Wisdom (the Secret Doctrine, that is) have been preserved save by the Masters? she asks, and without the Hidden

Wisdom why does the Society exist? It may strive to preserve a form of Protestant freedom; its spirit is wholly Catholic. "The theosophic religious community," says Keyserling, "in spite of all assertions to the contrary, is being crystallized more and more into a kind of Catholic church within which faith in authority, readiness to serve, and obedience are cardinal virtues.... The Theosophists aim at the triumph of their personal belief. They are the disciples of a new religion."

Theosophy presents a definite body of dogma which by the average person must be accepted or rejected upon its own authority, without appeal to proof in the ordinary sense of the word. A certain proof is offered to those who will undergo special preparation, but Sinnett, one of Madame Blavatsky's original converts, seems to state the essence of the matter in declaring that full proof is only possible to those who have full belief. In Theosophical writings is to be found an account, in astonishing detail,

a plan, astoundingly complete, of the universe, of its nature, origin, past (and even future), based not at all upon deduction from evidence, but simply, it is alleged, upon direct occult revelation. Revelations are granted only to the chosen few, and those less fortunate are for that reason bidden to follow and obey them. Thus C. W. Leadbeater writes of Mrs. Besant: "There will be times when you cannot understand her motives, for she is taking into account many things which you cannot see and of which she must not tell you. But whether you understand or not, you will be wise to follow her implicitly, just because she knows. This is no mere supposition on my part, no mere flight of the imagination; I have stood beside your President in the presence of the Supreme Director of evolution on this globe, and I know whereof I speak."

* * *

To enter the world of Theosophy is to enter a world apart, wherein the great leaders—con-

fidants of Heaven, instruments of Destiny—are men and women unknown to, or regarded only with raised eyebrows by, the general public. To follow Mrs. Besant's career first as Fellow and at last as President of the Society is necessarily to some extent to comment upon the Society's domestic politics—an ungrateful and unprofitable task. For in considerable part the Society's history is a record of controversies defying settlement by any ordinary observer—of the highest claims and equally the basest accusations made concerning its various prominent members from both within and without, often upon evidence not generally available and sometimes seemingly slender. The opposing parties frequently quarrel not only in their interpretation of the facts, but over the facts themselves. Many of the leading individuals have suffered at one time or another a sad sea-change in their opinions, expressed doubts of aspects of the life or work of this or that leader, or attributed these or those "occult"

manifestations to "glamour" or some form of conscious or unconscious deception. One's preference is for holding aloof, for gazing through the window rather than venturing in at the door, but at least one must trace the main influences affecting Mrs. Besant and her career, as well as her influences upon the progress and policies of the Society.

It has been made clear that when Mrs. Besant joined the Theosophical Society in 1889 it was not the avowed unsectarian aims which attracted her, but the teachings of Madame Blavatsky as set forth, so definitely as to preclude all manner of doubt, in the pages of *The Secret Doctrine*. She became a Theosophist because Madame Blavatsky gave her what seemed the first adequate solutions of problems which had long been puzzling her—combined with the deep personal impression the older woman made upon her. She gave herself, as always, to the new cause without hesitation or stint; in a very short time—a matter of a few

months—she was co-editor of *Lucifer*, President of the Blavatsky Lodge (the members of which were recipients of special teaching), and the "right hand" of Madame Blavatsky. The latter had, it is stated, always declared that her successor would be a woman, and her hopes were fixed upon Mrs. Besant from the day of her joining. Signs of special favour soon revealed themselves, both to Mrs. Besant herself and to others. She was still busied with Trade Union, Socialist, and School Board work (though gradually, within the next year or two, she withdrew from all non-Theosophical activities), and in July, 1889, she was called away to Paris to a great six-day Labour Congress, and from there joined Madame Blavatsky for the briefest of visits at Fontainebleau. Sleeping there one night, in a small room by herself, she was "waked suddenly and sat up in bed startled, to find the air of the room thrown into pulsing electrical waves, and then appeared the radiant astral Figure of the Master, visible to my phys-

ical eyes." She was to have, in the next year or two, "a considerable number of such first-hand experiences." It cannot have been long after this that Countess Wachtmeister one day "saw Annie Besant enveloped in a cloud of light —Master's colour. He was standing by her side with his hand over her head."

During all that summer and autumn of 1889 she was subjected to continual attack by her old comrades, especially among Free-Thinkers. In 1891, no less sensitive than her Masters about thrusting herself in where she was not wanted, she resigned finally from the National Secular Society.

Very soon, in 1890, she was living with Madame Blavatsky at the London headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Europe, giving more and more time to intensive study under that "noble and heroic soul." She proved an apt pupil, though "not psychic or spiritual in the least—all intellect." In May, 1891, Madame Blavatsky died (three months after

Charles Bradlaugh), leaving her most valued signet ring to Annie Besant as her successor in a general capacity, and in particular as Chief Secretary of the Inner Group of the Esoteric Section and Recorder of the Teachings, and as Outer Head also of the Esoteric Section.

This at least is according to one account, for there must be noted at this point the first serious disputes in the Society coming to the surface, and the beginning of a period of internal friction and dissatisfaction. What followed Madame Blavatsky's death has for the onlooker all the appearance of a vigorous if formal fight for the apostolic succession and the control of the Esoteric Section. Colonel Olcott was not directly concerned—he had never been a member of the Esoteric Section, and his position as President-Founder was practically unassailable—and once the first confusion had died down, the only two serious claimants were seen to be Mrs. Besant and William Quan Judge, then General Secretary of the American Sec-

tion. The former's position was a strong one, as both the highly favoured pupil of Madame Blavatsky and the only English Theosophist with a really wide general reputation. Her strong personality, her superhuman energy, her incessant labours—these all told to her advantage. She could be sure, always, of press publicity, of large audiences at her lectures. Under her influence, Theosophical work seemed to be spreading, gathering force, everywhere. She stood, in her own sphere, unrivalled. On the other hand, she had been a Theosophist scarcely two full years, while Judge was not only Vice-President but one of the original members.

Mrs. Besant was, when Madame Blavatsky's death was announced, in mid-ocean, homeward bound from a visit to the Convention of the American Section. She was first on the scene, but Judge followed on the next boat, and the Colonel made what haste he could from India. A compromise was arrived at after some difficulty, Mrs. Besant agreeing only upon re-

ceiving messages from—or supposedly from—the Masters; it was arranged that the Esoteric Section henceforth should have both Eastern and Western Divisions, the former (Europe and India) under Mrs. Besant, the latter (America) under Judge.

This was the beginning of the real trouble. Immediately influences became apparent working against Judge. Mrs. Besant for a time sided with him, accepted without question messages which came to her and others through him. Even as late as 1893, when with Judge and others she visited the Chicago Parliament of Religions and scored a vast success there for herself and for Theosophy, she seems to have supported him. But there, also, and then, she met Chakravarti, a mysterious Brahmin who for a number of years hovers in the background of Theosophical history, a constant yet evasive presence. From that meeting her attitude changed. A month later she informed Countess Wachtmeister that "Master" himself had told

her directly that letters received from Judge and "purporting to come direct from the Master" were not genuine. That winter she paid her first visit to India, and there, at Adyar, where the Indian Headquarters of the Society were now established, received not for the first time the order to take action. "I was bidden to wash away the stains on the Theosophical Society. 'Take up the heavy Karma of the Society. Your strength was given you for this.'" She returned to London as Judge's accuser, her main charge being one of "forging the names and handwritings of the Masters and misusing the said names and handwritings" to advance both his reputation and his authority. An inquiry was held in July, 1894, in London, but any decision was declared to be impossible since it involved a question of the existence of the Masters, upon which the Society as such could make no declaration. At once Mrs. Besant sailed for Australia, carrying practically Presidential powers bestowed upon her by Ol-

cott, and upon her return to Adyar she was able to announce that "Last year only India would have stood against Mr. Judge, America and Europe going with him, two sections to one, or the majority of the Theosophical Society. But by my Australasian visit a new section has been built up, and this stands with India and Europe in demanding Mr. Judge's resignation.... That is, we have three sections to one." These were, whatever else one may think of them, bold tactics. In November Judge declared her no longer head of any part of the Esoteric Section, of which he assumed full control; she was, he said, under the influence, however innocently, of "Dark Powers of Evil." Naturally she refused to accept his authority, and at the December Annual Convention at Adyar a resolution was passed calling upon him to resign his Vice-Presidency. The American Section replied by proclaiming its loyalty to Judge. In April seventy-five branches seceded; fourteen only declared for the parent body. These

were chartered by Olcott under a new General Secretary as the authorized American Section.

The whole case remains still a matter of controversy; it can probably never be settled upon its own merits. There appears to have been some evidence against Judge, but doubts cluster scarcely less thickly around the words and actions of those who opposed and defeated him. One must simply leave it without further comment. It does not very much matter. What does matter is that now Mrs. Besant stood alone as unquestionably the predominating personality among the leaders of the Society. Her fame, her "occultism"—her reputation for which grew with the passing years, and to which she added a background of intellectually conceived metaphysical speculation which to many minds made it the more acceptable—her ability to work continuously under extreme pressure, her countless lectures, her bombardments of tracts and text-books and articles, her confidence in herself and in whatever position she

adopted, the conviction she not only felt but so impressively conveyed, her powers as an orator: all these combined to make her more and more effectively the real leader of the Society. She took the helm, guided the ship through what stormy waters it had still to face, though Colonel Olcott was for many years yet to remain the figurehead. He had old-fashioned courtesy and dignity, and a commanding—if somewhat too paternal—presence; as a figurehead he was, indeed, excellent, but the Society took neither its direction nor its impulse from him.

* * *

When Mrs. Besant became a Theosophist she acquired not only an unexpected future but an unsuspected past. The new love had also the added merit of becoming at the same time the old love, and she discovered that for her India was very much more than simply the cradle of wisdom, that she was one of those who, "though born for this life in a Western

land and clad in a Western body, can yet look back to earlier incarnations in which they drank the milk of spiritual wisdom from the breast of their true mother," and who "must feel ever the magic of her immemorial past, must dwell ever under the spell of her deathless fascination, for they are bound to India by all the sacred memories of their past." Before ever she set eyes upon its shores it had become to her "in very truth the Holy Land."

It was on November 16th, 1893, that she landed for the first time in this life upon Indian soil, at Tuticorin, in the extreme south. Even if we have not yet learnt to look upon this landing as an historic event, still it seems to have created at least a considerable local and temporary sensation. In one by no means friendly account it is recorded that "in all the annals of the Theosophical Society there is nothing comparable to this Indian visit of Mrs. Besant's. From the first moment of her landing hers was a vice-regal progress and a triumph. Natives

and Europeans, members and non-members of the Society, crowded her with attentions. The pages of *The Theosophist* during the months of her presence in India were burdened with descriptions and laudations devoted to the *avatara* 'Annabai,' as she was christened by the enthusiastic Hindus. During her trip she visited the sacred places of India, held conferences with leading priests, proclaimed herself an Indian in heart and feeling."

Her lectures were hugely popular—sensationally so—and everywhere she was welcomed with eulogies and presented with wreaths and bouquets and garlands. If, as some have alleged, she pleased the Indians by flattery, saying that she had come among them to tell them of their country's ancient greatness, they strove to repay her in similar coin. "O Annie! heroine among the learned," the Bombay members greeted her, "you are a rare personage, and have become, O good lady, a priceless repository of excellent knowledge by churning the

great ocean of truth." The Annual Convention at Adyar that December was crowded; the enthusiastic students slept in the hall overnight in order to secure seats for the following day. The Colonel throughout the tour appears to have bestowed upon her every mark of his admiration and favour. At her departure in the following March he went to Bombay to bid her farewell. It was not to be for long. Before the end of the year she was in India again, and soon she had left England and Europe finally—save for visits—to make it her home thenceforward.

As though to mark the permanence of this change she became, as ever since she has remained, a Hindu. Partly because, as she said many years later, she found in Hinduism "the most satisfactory exposition of the Wisdom." Partly, possibly, she may have felt, as did Madame Blavatsky when she became a Buddhist: "I wanted to show that I thought a religion of the East was rather better than the religion of

the West." It may have been a profession; it was probably also a gesture. She wished to identify herself with India; she did so successfully that it has been remarked "that 'our' to Mrs. Besant, in England, talking to Englishmen, means Indian, not English."

Her first lecture delivered in India had been devoted to an account and renunciation of the materialistic "Western" beliefs she herself had held until a very few years before. She made at this time another newer and more momentous renunciation. "My work in the sphere of politics," she declared in an article printed early in 1894, "is over, and I shall never resume it. . . . I say this in answer to a suggestion that I should be aroused to take interest in Indian 'affairs.' To be able to lay at the feet of India any service is to me full reward for the many sufferings of a stormy life through which the power of service has been won. But the India that I love and reverence, and would fain see living among the nations, is not an India wes-

ternized, rent with the struggles of political parties, heated with the fires of political passions, with the people ignorant and degraded, while those who might have raised them are fighting for the loaves and fishes of political truth.... I honestly believe that the future of India, the greatness of India and the happiness of her people, can never be secured by political methods, but only by the revival of her philosophy and religion. To this, therefore, I must give all my energies, and I must refuse to spread them over other fields."

It is possible to accept this statement, with all its reasons, as wholly sincere and sufficient, and yet to wonder whether any move could just then have been strategically wiser—or more necessary. The Theosophical Society for some time after its establishment in India had been regarded unfavourably by the Government; neither of its Founders was British, and it was even suggested that Madame Blavatsky might be a Russian agent. These suspicions were very

soon dispelled, yet members for many years were careful to circumscribe their activities to mainly religious spheres—though in fact their teachings had a perceptible effect upon native political consciousness, and it is notable that a majority of those who in the early eighties were responsible for the origin of the Indian National Congress were native members of the Society. But Mrs. Besant was not long in discovering that it was impossible to bring about the spiritual revival she so ardently desired under existing conditions. It was necessary first to awaken a national self-consciousness, a pride in India's past, in her wonderful arts, her ancient industries and customs. Such an awakening could never be brought about in schools dominated by foreign officialdom; there must be created, she saw, a system of national education, of native schools controlled and staffed by Indians, pursuing not imposed European but innate Eastern ideals, studying not Latin but Sanskrit, not the Wars of the Roses but the

epics and dramas of India's history, and native art and literature and music. It is difficult to imagine that she did not realize what all this must lead to, inevitably back to politics, sooner or later to as active an opposition of the British Government policy as any campaign she had ever undertaken. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she saw that the demand for Home Rule was unavoidable, but that the country was not yet ready, the national spirit still slumbering—and so for twenty years worked with extraordinary patience and foresight, laying the foundations of future freedom as she knew they should be laid. (Has not Lord Haldane described her as the greatest of living statesmen?) If so, then Indians—and Englishmen—should honour her the more.

But it is not necessary to think so. The educational and religious consequences may well have seemed in themselves a sufficient end. She opened her campaign with lectures delivered far and wide over a number of years, speaking

primarily to Indians and advocating the organization of education upon national lines. She stood strongly, too, for the education of women and of the lower "depressed classes," and for the revival of Indian arts and industries; she preached, early, in favour of Swadeshi (boycott of British goods), though for social rather than political reasons and ends. She opposed also certain Indian customs, such as that of child-marriage, later making it one condition of entry to her schools that students should not marry until a reasonable age. In 1898, living then at Benares, she founded there at her Master's behest a school for giving to Hindus sound instruction upon secular and religious subjects; she received in this project the aid of Olcott and of many native Princes and other prominent Hindus. This was the beginning of the Central Hindu College; originally it was affiliated to the Allahabad University, but subsequently it became the nucleus of the Hindu University. In 1904 the Central Hindu Girls'

School was founded in Benares, and two years later free schools for the poorer classes. At intervals were opened numerous other schools for women and the "depressed classes" especially, and the Madanapalle High School and the Adyar National College. All over India to-day, it is said, are "a large number" of Theosophist and National Schools still mainly financed by Mrs. Besant. Her experience as a teacher, and still more as a member of the London School Board, was now invaluable to her, and her text-books upon Indian religious legend are widely used for the classes in Indian schools. In April, 1913, the Theosophical Educational Trust—very largely her own creation—was incorporated, its purpose being to continue the traditions of the Central Hindu College upon a broader basis. It works for the development of *Indian* culture, and the freedom and integrity of the various religions are fully recognized. In 1916 a Women's College in Benares was founded, and in 1921—to form a fitting if

inadequate climax—the Hindu University conferred upon her a degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of her valued and continuous services to education.

In this respect at any rate her work is scarcely to be belittled. She has, Hindus declare, exercised an influence over larger numbers of English-educated Hindus than any other person, while native officials believe that if today the Hindu feels proud of his country and of its past (and future), it was Annie Besant who made him conscious of his possession and his heritage, and who in the first place, following Olcott's somewhat tentative efforts, effectively inspired him to its study.

The decade following the expulsion of Mr. Judge and the secession of the American Section was a peaceful one for the Society as a whole. No sensational revelations, attacks, or innovations disturbed its serenity and steady progress. Now and then local opposition may have been roused by the educational work of

Olcott and Mrs. Besant in India and Ceylon, but that concerned them as individuals only, and in no way involved the Society. Minor changes there were, of course: Chakravarti, a power behind the scenes in 1893 and 1894, was discovered during this period to be "under the influence of the Dark Powers," and vanished, to be replaced in Mrs. Besant's good offices by another "psychic," an Englishman, whose name at least is probably better known to the general public—Charles Webster Leadbeater.

His is in many ways an interesting personality—scarcely less so than that of Annie Besant, though more difficult to estimate. He was born in 1847, and educated in South America and at Oxford University; as a young man he lost a fortune and took Holy Orders; for a while he was curate in a country parish of the Church of England. He came to Theosophy by way of spiritualism, met Madame Blavatsky in 1884, and accompanied her to India. From Adyar he was sent to Ceylon by Colonel Olcott, and

there spent some years, publicly declaring himself a "follower of the Lord Buddha," and receiving the Buddhist form of baptism. In 1889 he returned to England, joined A. P. Sinnett's intimate circle of inquirers, and became Secretary of the London Lodge. His unusual powers very rapidly raised him to prominence, though by some Theosophists his system of occultism is opposed as inducing mental aberration and moral irresponsibility. Mrs. Besant first received messages through him in the early nineties, and was apparently deeply impressed. In 1905 she brought out with him a volume giving the results of their first occult investigation into "thought-forms." This has been followed by similar works.

It was in 1905, too, and in connexion with Mr. Leadbeater, that there fell upon the Society a shadow of disaster. He had been in America, acting as tutor to a number of boys, the children of Theosophists, and charges—of a somewhat unpleasant nature—were brought

against him. No accusation was made publicly, but fellow-members of the Society deemed inquiry necessary. The President journeyed to London, there was a committee meeting early in 1906 at which Leadbeater is said to have made certain admissions, and his resignation was accepted. There the matter might well have ended—but it did not, for Mrs. Besant, although she sought, it is alleged, to attribute her experiences with him upon the astral plane to glamour, felt his passing into exile as an irreplaceable loss. And her opinion of and attitude to him was very shortly to become a question of the utmost importance not merely for a section but for the entire Society.

Colonel Olcott was an old man now, eighty-four years of age, and the case and its involved threats to his beloved organization tried his strength sorely. He sank slowly all that year through a long illness until at last, one February morning in 1907, "came from their far-off Ashramas in the snowy Himalayas, his own

Master, wearing the Rajput form, with that other gentlest One in form of Kashmiri Brahmana, and yet another one, Egyptian-born, who had had him also in charge, and They, with his dearest friend, H. P. B., came to fetch him to rest with Them in Their home, far north. His own Gurudeva snapped the cord that bound the man to his cast-off garment, and, sleeping in his Master's arms, as it were, he passed from earth." He had already declared Mrs. Besant —more definitely than discreetly—his successor, and towards the end, "in his deeper unconsciousness, a watcher heard him murmuring, 'I bless Annie. I bless Annie,' as though his thoughts clustered lovingly round the one to whom he had bequeathed his sacred work." There also occurred, subsequently, a number of "manifestations," several Masters visiting Adyar and "impressing" Mrs. Besant to be the President. Numerous members took exception to these unconstitutional proceedings, but still more opposition was roused by her asserted belief in the

strict purity of Leadbeater's life. It was known that Olcott had written—before his death, it is well to note—to Leadbeater, saying that the Masters had made clear to him that there was no question of "glamour" in connexion with his work, and that if he would renounce certain teachings the path of reconciliation to the Society might be opened; this was a possibility which all were not prepared to welcome. In April, 1907, members of the British Section telegraphed to Mrs. Besant: "Would you as President permit Leadbeater's readmission?" She replied: "If publicly repudiates teaching, two years after repudiation on large majority request of whole Society, would reinstate; otherwise not." This sounded definite enough, and in June she was elected President by a large majority of members. Two months later she still believed that "any proposal to reinstate Mr. Leadbeater in the membership of the Theosophical Society would be ruinous to the Society," and reasserted her re-

jection of any such application. Another fifteen months, and it became clear to her that she had wronged him, believing him to have admitted charges he still denied. She invited the General Council to review the evidence, and . . . he was invited, though not unanimously, to resume his membership. A number of members protested, a number resigned,[1] and many more regarded the situation with considerable misgiving.

The immediate effect upon the Society of her election was twofold. Upon the one hand she openly stated her devotion to the will of the Masters, and her intention to preserve it as "the chosen vehicle for the direct influence of the Masters of Wisdom on the World." Upon the other she imposed a more business-like organization of activities. Looking internally,

[1] On the whole, the membership of the society grows steadily with the passing years, but the rate of increase is only vaguely related to the numbers of new members. Many more come, than come to stay. In the thirty-two years of Olcott's Presidency there joined 32,000 members; in the first eighteen years of Mrs. Besant's 84,000; in all 116,000. But the present membership is less than 42,000.

her first care was to put the Society as a whole upon a sound financial basis, with strict and regular auditing of accounts; later she established a printing press at Adyar, and regularly enlarged and improved both the property generally and the Oriental Library. Looking out into the world, she sought to waken members to a wider and more intensive propaganda: "Our Lodges," she said in her Presidential Address, "should not be content with a programme of lectures, private and public, and with classes. The members should be known as good workers in all branches of beneficent activity. The Lodge should be the centre, not the circumference, of our work. To the Lodge for Inspiration and Knowledge; to the world for service and teachings. . . . There are many other lines of useful work which should be taken up, series of books to be planned, concerted activities in different lands. These are for the future. But I trust to make the Presidency a centre of life-radiating force, inspiring

and uplifting the whole Society." Whatever the impulse driving her to labour, she could always be trusted to work strictly upon lines of practical efficiency.

For the next few years she was kept constantly busy, not only working hard but travelling widely. In July, 1907, she left Adyar for America, spent August and September there, in October visited Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Italy, and in November was at Adyar again. Everywhere she visited sections of the Society, gave public lectures, won many new recruits to the cause, wakened older members to fresh endeavors, strengthened the bonds between herself and them. From May to September in the following year she was touring Australasia. In 1909 she visited parts of India, Europe, and America, then Europe and India again, in all travelling between January and December nearly forty-five thousand miles.

So far, so good, but there was another aspect to be considered. Theosophically speaking,

her election must have seemed to mark a climax. What higher than this, indeed, could follow? The answer was not long in appearing. Upon December 31st, 1908, there was made at Adyar the first public announcement of the Coming of a World-Teacher. It met among certain sections with scarcely more approval than had the return of Leadbeater—it may be noted how close one event followed upon the other—and further events were not slow in appearing which narrowed still further the basis of acceptance. A Brahmin had, about the beginning of 1909, found minor employment at the Adyar Headquarters, and in February his two young sons playing about the grounds attracted Leadbeater's attention. Krishnamurti, the elder, was then not quite fourteen years old. Leadbeater began a study of his past lives (the results of which have since been published in two large volumes; they are, from the purely historical point of view, considering the investigator's opportunities,

not very interesting) and was struck by his distinguished destiny as well as by the remarkable manner in which it was entangled with his own and that of Mrs. Besant and other distinguished Theosophists. This was no ordinary youth. Leadbeater wished to adopt him and his brother, and to have them educated in England. The father would not at first agree, but Mrs. Besant pressed the matter and finally adopted them herself. In December they came to live at the Headquarters as Leadbeater's pupils; scarcely a month later (January 11th, 1910) was celebrated Krishnamurti's "initiation"—"the occult 'birth of the young child,' who in due time shall become the vehicle for the blessing of the world." In January, 1911, was founded the Order of the Rising Sun of India, which later became the now familiar Order of the Star in the East, an organization existing primarily to prepare for the Coming. It had, like the Esoteric Section, no official connexion with the Society, but in practice ap-

pears to be scarcely less closely associated. Like the Society, too, it offered a formal freedom of opinion. "The member of the Order," Mrs. Besant said, "is left free to recognize greatness for himself; no one dictates to him whom he shall reverence. If any member claimed to force upon others *his* own object of reverence, then opposition to such claim would be reasonable." Yet she herself spoke freely of the awaited Coming to the body of Alcyone (Krishnamurti) of "the greatest messenger of the Great White Lodge," and her penalty for non-recognition allows little alternative save to the strong-minded or obstinate than acquiescence: "Reject Him again when He comes if you will, and then let your civilization go down as others which have gone before."

During 1911 she brought the brothers to England for a brief visit, returning again in October; on December 28th, at the Benares Convention, there took place an incident which can have left little doubt, or at any rate little

open choice, among members of the Order. According to Mrs. Besant's own account there had been that day a lecture dealing with the Order by Dr. G. S. Arundale, and it was suggested in a casual way that newcomers then joining would like to receive their certificates from the Head of the Order—Alcyone. The ceremony—a perfectly simple one—was arranged for the evening. First Mrs. Besant spoke a few words, then Alcyone stepped forward. But "suddenly the whole atmosphere changed, and great vibrations thrilled through the hall, the slender boyish figure took on a surprising majesty, the line of approaching members was struck by a common impulse, and one after another, old and young, men and women, Indians, Europeans, and Americans, as they reached him, stretched out quivering hands to take their papers, and bowed their heads at his feet to receive his blessing, while he, serene and with an exquisite smile of welcome to each, bent with hands outstretched in benediction, as

simply and naturally as though naught extraordinary was happening." Another account speaks of coronets of blue light enclosing a "Rosy Cross," and of a "dazzling flashing Star" blazing down from the roof above. "What," asked Mrs. Besant, "shall be the end of a mission thus begun and thus consecrated?"

That, sixteen years later, still remains to be seen, but an immediate consequence was that the father of Krishnamurti, disliking the proceedings, asked that his sons should return to him, or be separated finally from Leadbeater. Again in 1912 Mrs. Besant took the boys to Europe; they arrived at Adyar on October 23rd; and on October 24th a plaint was lodged against her by the father for the recovery of the children. The case, a distasteful one, in which old "insinuations" concerning Leadbeater were repeated in the fullest possible detail, was heard in the following March and April. Judgment was given ordering Mrs. Besant to hand over the custody of the boys to the father,

and at the same time they were declared wards of the court. The plaintiff was directed to pay costs. An appeal was lodged, and in October the High Court of Madras upheld the judgment, but made each party responsible for its costs. Again she appealed, this time to the Privy Council, and upon May 25th, 1914, the original judgment was quashed, she was granted all costs against the father, and her guardianship of the vehicle of the World-Teacher was made secure.

* * *

Wisdom, she had declared in 1894 in renouncing interest in Indian "affairs," was above politics as spirit above matter. But she gradually learned, in her new home, that as the spirit can only become effective upon certain levels by utilizing matter, so wisdom might for practical ends be compelled to utilize politics. Her work for Indian Home Rule has, as far as she is concerned, no new significance; she being what

she was, as politician—for the mental habits of years are not instantly to be put off—and as Theosophist, it all followed necessarily from her choice of India as her home, from her peculiar affection for it, her idealization of its past and traditions, her sense of having received and developed powers that she might use them in its service.

It has been said already that it is not necessary to suppose that she herself realized her future when at the direction of the Masters she first undertook her educational schemes at Benares and elsewhere. Five years had still to pass before even the beginning of the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon—in his own way one of the stupidest men who ever set foot in India—and nearly a dozen before, in his final year, the time of real repression set in. Mrs. Besant upon a memorable occasion told Lord Pentland that by interning her he was striking the deadliest blow against the British Empire; she had, no doubt, forgotten Lord Curzon. His pecul-

iar mission was to waken Indian self-consciousness and to make clear the necessity for freedom, by showing as plainly as could be his British dislike and scorn for Indians as members of an inferior race, the more to be despised in that they were defenceless. Englishmen have always displayed a proper horror of the "intolerable degradation of a foreign yoke," but naturally no Englishman was or could be a foreigner—even in India—and no reasonable Indian would regard him as such.

But Mrs. Besant was not reasonable; her preference, in fact, was always for Indians, and she could not but be affected by the rising tide of opinion. As early as 1903 she was criticizing Anglo-Indian relations upon educational and political grounds. In both cases she admitted the good intentions of the English, but not their wisdom. The main result of Lord Curzon's efforts for native education, she suggested, was to make its cost prohibitive; the need was for educated Indian teachers rather

than highly paid Englishmen who understood little or nothing of their pupils' psychology. As for the happiness of the people generally, it seemed to her that the old rule of the native kings had been better, that there had been then at least no exportation of grain without provision for inevitable famine; no selling of the peasant's sole livelihood, his land; no destruction of inimitable native handicrafts by the importation of shoddy Manchester manufactures; no burden of English administrative charges. The satisfactory government of India by the British Parliament seemed to her impossible; more practical, she thought, would be the building up in India of a council of the wisest of its own people, its best administrators, as feudatory chiefs, gathered around a Viceroy appointed not for political services in England but for knowledge and understanding of India.

Such views, naturally, were not popular in official circles; she was accused of using education as a cloak for politics, and in 1910, it ap-

pears, was nearly prosecuted for an Appeal to Englishmen to refrain from "insulting treatment of Indians" in public places. She was still, however—partly in consequence of her other activities—largely isolated from progressive political thought, and she aroused against herself a considerable degree of antagonism by the hostile attitude she took towards Nationalist upheavals in Bengal and elsewhere. It may have been that she judged the ground as a whole still not ready, or that she feared the division of India. Certainly she opposed, at all times, violence of any kind; she had learnt from Bradlaugh that violence breeds only violence, that tyranny must be resisted, but resisted lawfully. It was not until 1913 that she began to proclaim publicly that "the price of India's loyalty is India's Freedom."

That throughout has been her attitude. At no time has she sought India's separation from the Empire; rather, recognizing as inevitable, not to say desirable, the increasing demand of

Indians for self-government, she strove to guide that demand towards the idea of Home Rule within the Empire rather than as an isolated and independent country. There was no question of raising a new issue, though she did perhaps bring it forward into the light. The movement of revolt was already there, and going deeper, it seemed to her, than either she or others had at first imagined. It was expedient to work for Home Rule not only for the sake of India; it was expedient for the sake of the Empire.

She began her new campaign in the autumn of 1913 with a series of lectures in Madras, and with a suggestion to the Indian National Congress that it should put itself at the head of "a national movement embodying religious, educational, and social, as well as political, reforms." This the Congress, which, like much of India, was then "still slumbering," judged impracticable, but she, not to be thwarted, started forthwith from Adyar *The Common-*

weal, a weekly newspaper the first number of which appeared on January 2nd, 1914. That spring she visited London, where she knew there existed a body of opinion favouring radical remedy for Indian unrest, but found that, temporarily, Irish was the only Home Rule that politicians would consent to discuss. That July (as again in 1921) she was re-elected President of the Theosophical Society, and in the same month she purchased an Indian daily paper and began its publication from Adyar under the new title *New India.* "It sounded out the Self-Government note of 1906" (when the President of the National Congress had declared that "Indians should control India, as Englishmen controlled England"), "and urged that instead of asking for Reforms piecemeal, we should bend our energies to win Self-Government, Home Rule, and make the reforms for ourselves."

Then came the war, from the fever of which she was no more immune than many another of

our sages. As an occultist she regarded its events as "the shadow of a struggle in the higher worlds" between the Occult Hierarchy and the Lords of the Dark Face, whose servants the Germans were. She could not, therefore, but be strongly anti-German; there was a temporary split in the Society, but the old bonds have since been resumed. In the meantime, as a purely personal matter, her work for Indian Home Rule went on.

She still saw clearly that if Indian opinion was to be united to support her schemes, she must have the National Congress upon her side, and so, despite her first rebuff, she returned to the attack. There was at this time a growing unrest, a desire for reform, but few definite proposals; politics were regarded largely as "a pastime for the well-to-do." Now she came forward boldly, giving form and order to what before had been but vague aspiration. At the 1914 Congress (held in December) she appeared for the first time upon its platform, and

was welcomed as a powerful ally and advocate. The Congress itself was then divided upon several important matters, and through 1915 she was working for reunion with a considerable degree of success. One example of the practical lines upon which she worked in other ways is afforded by her establishment in Madras of a Parliamentary Debating Society designed to give Indians training in political forms and usages. But still the general lack of effort dissatisfied her; she wanted not annual Congress meetings but a continually active propagandist body to advocate Home Rule as the Secularists had advocated Free-Thought, the Fabians Socialism, or her own Society Theosophy. She gave the Congress the fullest opportunity of taking up her scheme, but at last in September, 1916, launched it herself. Despite official opposition, the demanding of securities for her papers, her exclusion from certain areas, and other restrictions, she toured widely, addressing huge audiences in many places, strove to

strengthen the links by which she had already drawn together for her single purpose the opposed parties of the Congress and the Muslim League. As many times before, she used opposition to advertise her own cause; it "all made propaganda," she said, "and educated the people to understand the benefits of bureaucratic rule." That December her work was endorsed and her Home Rule Scheme adopted by Congress and League; she was acknowledged throughout India to be one of the most influential leaders of progressive political thought.

Early in 1917 Lord Pentland, Governor of Madras, threatened repressive measures; she attacked his attitude and was summoned for an interview on June 16th; he told her that she was to be interned. She asked why. He replied: "I cannot discuss that, Mrs. Besant." She pointed out, not without acerbity, that Sir Reginald Craddock had said that no one would be interned without a full statement of the of-

fence committed. Again he replied: "I cannot discuss it, Mrs. Besant." He offered her a safe-conduct to England on condition that she would remain there for the duration of the war. She refused, and suggested that she was only wasting His Excellency's time. He said: "I wish you to consider, Mrs. Besant, that we cannot discriminate and the whole of your activities will be stopped."

She replied: "You have all the power and I am helpless, and you must do what you like. There is just one thing I should like to say to Your Excellency, and that is that I believe you are striking the deadliest blow against the British Empire in India!"

Her internment followed immediately, at Ootacamund, one of the pleasantest spots in India. But it did not last long, for throughout the country there broke out a storm of protest, disturbing echoes of which were heard even in England and America. "Who would have thought," one high official asked indignantly,

"that there would have been such a fuss about one old woman?" The agitation continued until the British Government declaration of August 20th, 1917, that "the goal of Great Britain in India was Responsible Government," and the announcement that Mr. Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, would visit the country "to learn the wishes of the people." Mrs. Besant was released unconditionally; she returned to freedom more popular and more powerful than ever, and four months later, at the next National Congress, was elected President and acclaimed again and again as India's champion. It was, politically, the moment of her greatest triumph; unhappily it was little more than a moment. The promised Montagu-Chelmsford Proposals for Reform, when issued, satisfied no one, and the subsequent Rowlatt Act, Sir Michael O'Dwyer's determination to carry the Curzon spirit into vigorous action, and General Dyer's memorable "bank-holiday" at Amritsar, did not improve matters. At first

Mrs. Besant was among the critics of the proposals; she found in them "no vision for India of even future evolution into freedom." But soon she saw the danger of Gandhi's policy of Non-Co-operation, and how inevitably it must lead to strife and disorder; she urged discretion, the need for constitutional progress. No one would listen. Gandhi now was as completely leader of the Congress as she had been a little while before, and those who had shouted for her then, now "yelled at her, tried to gag her in their National Congress and on public platforms, tried to hound her out of the field of politics." She was howled down, hooted, and hissed at meetings. At the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay she was refused a hearing. Yet she remained cool and calm, still determined upon her course and following it without deviation; she opposed Gandhi in her papers, gathered those about her who would work for the Proposals for what they were worth, and eventually founded the Reforms Conferences

and the National Conference Movement.

In 1923 her returning influence began to be felt, though it was not until 1924 that she was able to bring together India's elected representatives sitting in the various legislatures for the first meeting of the National Convention to frame a Constitution for India. The "Commonwealth of India Bill," embodying the work of the Convention, was brought to England by her in July, 1925, and presented in the House of Commons in December; it was again introduced into the House in 1927. It is the first Constitution for India drawn up by representatives in a National Convention, and it seems probable that it will be the one practical proposal for Dominion Status for India which will be laid before the Statutory Royal Commission to be appointed in 1929 under the provisions of the existing Government of India Act of 1919.

Mrs. Besant has never, even to-day, regained her height of triumph, or brought about a like

unanimity of purpose. But her policy, if not her popularity, is built upon a solid basis, upon a sane recognition of actualities—which is more than can be said of that of her opponents, either English or Indian. If only, some will say, she had been content with statesmanship...

* * *

While she was in London in the summer of 1924 there was celebrated at the Queen's Hall the jubilee of her public activities, exactly one half-century having passed since her meeting with Bradlaugh and the delivery of her first public speech. In 1925 there took place yet another jubilee which even to her cannot have been less important, less memorable, less profoundly stirring—though it must be admitted that as yet very few persons seem to have heard either of it or of the remarkable event for which it formed the setting. It was the Jubilee Convention, held at Adyar, of the Theosophical Society.

Since the first announcement of the Coming of the World-Teacher, seventeen years before, there had been in the Society, not unnaturally, an increased tension and enthusiasm and activity of preparation. Not only among the ordinary members, either, for the Highest Section of the Society, withdrawn in the eighties, had been reconstituted, and a number of the Masters had taken once more their old positions of direction and control. The results were soon apparent. Orders were established to carry out both religious and educational work, and at the suggestion of the World-Teacher Himself three lines of work had especially been followed. One was purely educational. Another concerned Co-Masonry. Yet another resulted in the establishment in 1916 of the Liberal Catholic Church—deriving from "the ancient Church of Holland"—over which Bishop Leadbeater, resident in Australia, presides. Matters once in doubt were now no longer so. It was already known that the Com-

ing of the World-Teacher was to be hastened by some years, it was known that not only would he come, and soon, but that he was even then living in the Himalayas, in a very beautiful home overlooking the plains of Northern India. It was known that the body he used there was too fine and delicate to be subjected to the harsher contacts of this wider world, needing to withstand them too tremendous an expenditure of spiritual power, and that therefore he would "utilize a body which has been carefully trained in purity of life for the purpose." All this was known, and whose the body was to be, "because," Mrs. Besant had declared, "I have heard the Christ say so." It was known too that the twelve apostles were already chosen—among them Mrs. Besant and Bishop Leadbeater.

Yet the great event, when at Adyar, upon December 28th, 1925, the World-Teacher "spoke for the first time in our lower world for some two thousand years" through "the mouth

of His vehicle," seems to have been an unexpected honour. Krishnamurti was delivering an address when, as he spoke of the World-Teacher, it became evident that he was under some strong influence. "We are all expecting Him," he was saying, "Who is the Example, Who is the embodiment of nobility. He will be with us soon, He *is* with us now. He comes to lead us all to that perfection where there is eternal happiness; He comes to lead us, and He comes to those who have not understood, who have suffered, who are unhappy, who are unenlightened. He comes to those who want, who desire, who long——" Mrs. Besant continues her account: "The speaker started, stopped a moment, and then another voice rang out through his lips, a voice not heard on earth for two thousand years.

'I come to those who want sympathy, who want happiness;
Who are longing to be released;
Who are longing to find happiness in all things;
I come to reform and not to tear down;
Not to destroy, but to build.'

These were the words which rang out above a crowd of some six thousand people. Some only saw a great light, some saw the Christ Himself, all heard the Voice."

Surely to Mrs. Besant at least it cannot but have been the supreme moment of her life. It is certainly one upon which it is useless—indeed, impossible—to comment.

Since then she has but set more vigorously to work. With the Coming must begin a new civilization, and it is to its foundation, to the creation of the conditions in which its seeds may be sown, that, under the orders of her Masters, she is directing her energies. A centre of work has already been established in Holland; a scheme is at present in progress to acquire land in a beautiful Californian valley and there to form "a miniature model of the New Civilization, in which bodies, emotions, and minds shall be trained and disciplined in daily life into health, poise, and high intelligence, fit dwellings for the Divine Life, developing the

spirit of Brotherhood practically in everyday arrangements and methods of living." California has, presumably, been chosen because there more numerously than anywhere is appearing (it is said) a new human type, a new sub-race—the sixth sub-race of the Fifth or Aryan Root-Race—the members of which are to be the essentially formative element in the new civilization. It is to the form and subject of this civilization that Mrs. Besant's most recent lectures and writings have been devoted, and to which, as wholeheartedly as ever, she is giving her energies, "joyfully," in her eightieth year. Such certainty, such faith, is given to few to-day; the Spirit of the Age has changed. To marvel, possibly to envy, certainly to admire—that is all of which we, most of us, seem to be capable.

5

Now that the past has at last been traversed, it remains only to glance for one brief moment to the future. It is not irrelevant to ask concerning Mrs. Besant what we ask of all outstanding figures—where in one hundred, in five hundred, years will her reputation stand? Will it stand at all? She herself, it is safe to say, will not care one farthing for the answer, or for any earthly immortality—quite apart from the fact that she seems to know tolerably certainly what the Fates (or the Masters) have in store for her—but for ourselves it is not wholly impertinent.

In reading the tributes of her friends and fellow-workers one is apt to gain an impression of her as a world-figure followed already by the greater number of the peoples of the earth. But Lord Northcliffe once, to his astonishment,

made the discovery that millions of men and women had never heard of Pears' soap; it is salutary, and indeed necessary if a sense of proportion is to be retained, to remind oneself that similarly millions of men and women, even in cities where she has lectured year after year, know no more of Mrs. Besant than her bare name, if that.

She has been considered in these pages primarily in three aspects: as pioneer, as spiritual pilgrim, and as personality. What must be our estimate of her, let us say as pilgrim? As a great spirit shattering the bonds of time and place, finding no agony of body or spirit sufficient to turn her aside from her quest of an Eternal Truth? Alas! it is here not enough to be brave—one may still be mistaken. Mrs. Besant appears to many to have shared with Booth and Stead—to mention two contemporary figures—an overwhelming instinct and desire for religion together with inadequate equipment for its apprehension, lacking those

sensitive refinements of the spiritual nature which alone give hope of victory. The religious heart is, unfortunately, no warrant of the religious soul. Mrs. Besant, no doubt, regards Theosophy as her final triumph; by that alone, Theosophists will say, her name must be carried to posterity—they are of course in the fortunate position of *knowing* that their religion is to prosper unfailingly. We, however, in our ignorance, can only wonder. Is Theosophy to be the—or even a—world-religion of the future? It seems doubtful, for while Theosophy becomes increasingly Catholic, increasingly a religion of authority, the tendency of the West, and eventually of the world, is to the Protestant spirit—the assertion of the free individual.

Here again Keyserling's criticism—of all criticisms of Theosophy perhaps the most acceptable and convincing—should be studied. As a world-religion it must, he suggests, prove historically ineffective because it adheres "to ideals which, from a historical point of view, have

ceased to operate. The new saviour is blessed as the 'Lord of Mercy'; the virtues of humility, obedience, readiness to serve, compassion and gentle love, are presented as the supreme virtues. They are perhaps the supreme feminine virtues, but a historical future awaits masculine virtues only for some time to come.... Where one of two individuals has initiative and the other lacks it, the latter will inevitably fall behind in the race. For this reason, all the feminine forms of religion are played out as historically effective factors ever since the masculine spirit awoke." To-day "the Westerner recognizes less and less unalterable factors; he accepts voluntarily more and more responsibility, and the idea of predestination loses truth correspondingly from period to period. Theosophy rejects all new creation: the whole future is said to be predestined from eternity; every new manifestation is supposed to be conditioned by previous karma; all events are controlled according to a preconceived plan." (Keyserling is

right here, in fact if not according to the letter.) Scarcely less important, as a criticism of Theosophy, is his declaration that "we have in principle got beyond the stage in which we can seriously accept the metaphysical forms," that men "*themselves,* as personally active individuals, have stepped into the shoes of all possible ideals: that the time of external exponents is over, that the foci of the ellipsis are beginning to melt into the centre of a circle, that faith and being are becoming one, and that the hour has come to take self-determination absolutely in earnest." The reality of much of Theosophy's alleged occultism may be probable; nevertheless it is beside the point, its significance wholly scientific, in no sense religious: "the more we discover of the hidden forces of nature the more important does it become to understand that self-realization alone matters; that *it is spiritually quite irrelevant, not only whether we are clairvoyant or blind, but also whether there are gods or not.*"

Again, Theosophists claim that their teachings have permeated modern thought in every direction, and are directly responsible for "modernism" in religion, the rejection of literal interpretation of the Bible, the study by the clergy of comparative religion, the prevailing liberty of thought and general tolerance in religion. Science, they say, has been profoundly affected, and one result may be seen in the wide recognition of "psychic research" as a legitimate object of serious inquiry. William James is said to have been influenced by Theosophical ideas, and it is asserted that not only many ideas in philosophy are derived or adapted from Eastern teachings brought West by Madame Blavatsky, but that many discoveries in physics, etc., were anticipated in the pages of *The Secret Doctrine*. Yet the claims seem extremely open to question; the beginnings of all these influences and impulses were discernible before the Theosophical Society came into existence; perhaps it has helped—it can scarcely

be said to have originated. Mrs. Besant, it has already been suggested, has been since Madame Blavatsky's death the living centre of the Society, which has under her Presidency gone forward from strength to strength, to prosperity and influence; but only time can show whether without her it can preserve its position. For herself, whatever its fate, it appears undeniable that in Theosophy Mrs. Besant has increasingly rejected her earlier ideals, denied what, at her most masculine, her most modern, her most significant, she stood for. If this criticism of Theosophy is to be accepted, then it must be accepted too that the spiritual pilgrimage of Mrs. Besant has by her own highest ideals ended in spiritual failure. If she is right, she is magnificently and utterly right; if wrong, then the magnitude of her error is the more likely to draw her with it into oblivion.

What, then, as personality? In herself she is, it is apparent, a woman of overwhelming personality, yet even as such, though her fellow-

workers seem unable to express adequately their admiration, she appears to have made little impression upon her contemporaries in general, to have appealed scarcely at all to their imaginations. Of her greatness as an orator there can be no doubt—though here it might be truer to call her a public speaker, for she has always been primarily a propagandist. It is difficult to imagine that many of her speeches will be read in future years, for their own sake, as literature. Their matter is everything, their manner nothing, they are contributions to controversy rather than to knowledge, and when the dust of their particular conflict drifts to earth, they will lie—as many of them already do—forgotten beneath it. Something the same may be said of her voluminous writings; he must needs be a hardy soul who, save as a student, essays to read them. Style she has never had, and though haste may account for the more formless sentences and paragraphs to be found occasionally in her work, it is diffi-

cult to reconcile them with the smallest degree of literary intention or feeling. At her best she can express herself straightforwardly, with admirable directness, yet even her *Autobiography,* which of all her writings possesses the greatest general interest, must be read for its tale rather than its telling. Its significance, that is to say, is all upon the surface, in its plain facts; it is useless to seek below for deeper meaning. There is in its pages no hidden harmony, no voice of the soul, no secret beauty.

Is not this the lack which runs throughout, which helps to account for one's ultimate feeling that gifted as undoubtedly she is, she is possibly less gifted than a superficial study of her achievements might suggest? Is it not that what talents she has possessed she has always controlled with a skill and completeness amounting to genius, and always directly and forcefully to a single end? She has been at all times utterly sincere, utterly certain of her cause, of its righteousness, its nobility, its tri-

umph; at all times she has looked steadfastly forward, made at every change the cleanest of cuts with the entanglements of the past. All these things make for the utmost efficiency, but they no more indicate richness of personality than they do spiritual power. It might be suggested that Mrs. Besant probably has more in common with, say, Mr. Henry Ford than with such teachers as Buddha and Jesus. She herself is to be found, to an unusual degree, in her work, and she must be estimated, again to an unusual degree, by the tangible results of her labours.

So we return to her as pioneer. Her work there, her life-long battle for freedom of thought and of speech, for truth and for enlightenment, in politics and in religion, and in England and in India, certainly will stand; it has already become part of history. Yet even here it is arguable that she originated nothing, gave nothing to the world which otherwise it must have lacked, but which now is its imperish-

able heritage; that what she did was simply—*it is a great service*—to hasten processes already existing. The modern spirit would have come to birth without her, even had it been born with more difficulty, after delay. Even of her work in India this may be held to be wholly true. She has been in this respect rather an assistant than a creator; she has added to the sum-total of progress only relatively, and though her immortality in her work can be considered assured, it is not unlikely to be an anonymous immortality.

For herself, she leaves no distinctive body of writings, no vitally original thought, to carry on her name. As a phenomenon of sheer energy, of unfailing courage, of noble sincerity, she will live always in the memories of all who have known her; her fame beyond that point, considering her present position, seems curiously problematical.

Mrs. Besant is, it may again at this point be asserted, one of the most remarkable of living

women, and to suggest that she is for our time rather than for all time in no way detracts from her uniqueness, or from the gratitude which we to-day, as the direct beneficiaries of her herculean labours and sacrifices, owe to her. It is the exaggerated claims of her enthusiastic admirers which make some attempt to restore proportion occasionally essential. Only when they are moderated does it seem possible that she will be given the wider admiration which, for her services, is her due.

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